

CALVING EASE

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Editors

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Safety at Clean-up Time

When we hear about a farm accident involving cleaning materials many of us resolve to be more safety conscious. But, resolutions have a way of sliding down the list of priorities when we're really busy or pushed for time. This newsletter is intended to help us focus our attention on urgently needed standards for cleaning safety.

What are the Risks?

The most common cleaning agents found in calf/heifer operations are some form of dish-washing-like soap, some source of chlorine and an acid-rinse concentrate. Sometimes the soap and chlorine are combined while on other farms folks use plain soap and a separate chlorine bleach.

Drinking or any form of oral ingestion of these three is clearly bad news. Children are at greatest risk here. If there is any possibility of young children having access to the clean-up area, then this risk is real and could easily result in either death or permanent disabilities.

Fumes: All of us are at risk of breathing fumes from these cleaning agents. Ordinary dish washing detergent similar to that used in our kitchens probably is low risk for caustic fumes. At the other extreme, generation of poisonous gases by accidental mixing of chlorine-containing cleaners with the acid rinse solutions can be deadly. Eyes. If our cleaners are highly diluted, most of them represent a low level of risk. But, if while measuring concentrated cleaners we get the concentrated bleach or acid into our eyes serious consequences can result. Exposing our skin to cleaners can vary from incidental risk (highly diluted solutions) to serious burns (concentrated cleaners).

Bottom line on risk? When stored and used properly, our cleaners are low risk materials. It's when we get careless or haven't given enough thought to safety that accidents occur.

Five Resolutions to Improve Cleaning Safety

One: Make certain small children do not have access to these cleaners. On one farm that may mean installing a shelf too high for little hands to reach. At another place it might be using containers with safety caps. At another farm children may not be allowed into the cleaning area at all.

Two: Always store cleaning chemicals in labelled containers. The preferred container is the original one. Where large quantities are purchased requiring transfers to smaller containers, be certain that the small containers are clearly and permanently labelled. Of course, never, never, never use a beverage bottle or can for cleaning chemicals.

Three: Instruct every person using cleaning chemicals on their proper and safe use. This includes telling a person how much of each chemical to use in each step of the cleaning process. It also means going over which chemicals can be used together safely and which ones must never be mixed together.

Four: Practice safety procedures. The most common problem we have observed with these chemicals is spills of concentrated cleaners on skin. Each person using these chemicals could practice the recommended step: "Flush exposed areas thoroughly with water." The second most common problem we have observed is minute quantities of chemicals splashing into people's eyes. Practice in this case means showing each person how to flush their eyes with water - a response that may seem obvious. But eye flushing really needs to be rehearsed so it can be done properly in the event of an exposure.

Five: This may be an unpopular resolution but here it comes anyway. Get a Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS) from your supplier for all of your cleaning chemicals. Keep these in a notebook. This may not be practical for ordinary dishwashing detergent purchased at the supermarket. However, it should be done for powdered chlorinated cleaners, acid rinses and sanitizers purchased at farm supply stores and milking supply companies. Keep these MSDS sheets in a place to which everyone has access in an emergency. For example, suppose the plastic pump on a gallon container of acid rinse splits squirting concentrated acid in your face. After flushing your skin and eyes you will need medical care. The MSDS for that acid needs to go with you so that the medical professional knows not only the kind of chemical involved but has access to an 800 phone number to get detailed information for treatment. That way they can choose appropriate treatment for your skin and eyes.

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