

CALVING EASE

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Bottle Feeding

Bottle-feeding very young calves seems like such a simple task. Fill the bottle, stick on a nipple, offer it to a calf, calf drinks, job finished. Oh, but anyone who has bottle fed calves knows that it really doesn't work that way. Or, at least it doesn't work that way one hundred percent of the time.

Start Right

There is no need to do a job incorrectly from the start. That's true for bottle-feeding. So, start with clean equipment. Is bacterial contamination likely? Then a preuse sanitation step could make a world of difference to the calf's insides. Three factors control how well sanitizing works. Temperature. Time. Concentration of sanitizer. Prior to filling a nursing bottle fill it with hot, hot water and about a tablespoon of household bleach. Let it sit for as long as your patience can stand. Being careful not to burn your hands, dump it out over the nipple you are going to use as well as your hands. Now, fill with milk, milk replacer, colostrum, or whatever. It can be warmed or just fed. But, at least the bottle and nipple are not loaded with scours-causing coliform bacteria that seem to be everywhere on a dairy.

Are you are feeding more than one bottle at a time? Keep in mind that the ideal feeding temperature is the same as a calf's body temperature. That's about 102 degrees. How warm will the second or later bottle be after spending time feeding the previous ones? Planning ahead is essential. A five-gallon pail will hold up to four nursing bottles just fine. Add enough 120-degree water to keep things warm. Presto! Warm milk even in the fourth bottle. Of course, when the weather is extremely cold it makes sense to put a cover on the pail to retain the heat.

Keep Stress Low

There is no good reason that feeding a bottle needs to be a high stress event (at least for the calf). We all know that good animal husbandry practice is to handle a calf quietly and gently. Unfortunately there are calves that no one told about the quiet and gentle part. At times they can be pretty wild and spooky. That's why it makes good sense to approach calves slowly and quietly. Especially when feeding colostrum to newborns get them into a corner where they can't run. Get an arm below their neck and across their chest. Even if they try to escape it's only up and into your grasp.

And, yes, it is a problem keeping your cool when feeding bottles in a pen of five-day old bull calves that are due to be shipped tomorrow. They all want to be fed at once and can be pretty rough. Patience, and pray for tomorrow.

One good biological reason for the low stress quiet and gentle approach is that stressed calves have less effective

closure of their esophageal groove. Remember that's the muscular fold that channels milk into the appropriate stomach (abomasum). Good closure is healthier than poor closure. Stress at feeding time interferes with optimum closure.

Monitor Drinking

How often do you insert nipple and your mind drifts off to someplace else? It's easy to do. But, especially with very young calves careful monitoring is essential. Now, of course your dairy does not have nipples with the ends cut open for sixty-second feeding of two quarts. But, just in case one might appear out of the blue, remember that there is a wide variation among calves in their ability to suckle. These cutout nipples allow guzzlers to knock back two quarts in nothing flat. Love them! We could even drop the bottle into a holder and they would still nurse okay.

In contrast the "sippers" don't seem to be able to suck in and swallow more than a tablespoonful at a time. Then they lose the nipple and can't figure out what to do next. Oh, man, is she ever going to finish? My experience suggests between five and ten percent of our very young calves are like this. Unfortunately if our nipple allows an excessive amount into a "sippers" mouth she can't swallow all of it. Some of the excess may trickle into her windpipe (trachea) at her next breath. She chokes. Not good. This increases the chances for her having respiratory illness in the near future.

This is when we should be monitoring suckling. If all goes well I drift off to dream about chocolate. If she chokes we need to stop feeding. Is the nipple opening is too large? If so, replace it. One with a smaller hole (not one in which you can slip your thumb) may work better. She will tell you right away when she starts to nurse again. She either chokes or she doesn't.

If she continues to choke remember that calves can swallow uphill. Just lower the bottle below the top of her back. This assumes that you, like ninety-nine percent of bottle feeders, are holding the bottle up at a level convenient for you rather than the calf. The lower position may solve the choking problem as much as half of the time.

Calf Feeder's Tip

Heads up – yours! Avoid getting smashed in the face. Remember how quickly a calf can move. When restraining a calf as described above, keep your face well away from the top of the calf's head (the poll). In a contest between her poll and your face, you will always lose.