

CALVING EASE

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STARTER

What's starter? You say, "Grain?" Well, that's sort of the correct answer. Calf starter takes a lot of different forms. On one farm it's rolled high moisture corn mixed with a commercial protein supplement. On another farm it's a purchased feed containing dry cracked corn, oats and a pelleted protein supplement. On another farm No need to describe all the possible variations.

What do most of the calf starters have in common? They all contain grain. That's good. Grains are fermented in the developing rumen. This fermentation produces compounds that promote the nutrient-absorbing rumen lining.

Many calf starters are higher in protein than feed mixed for mature cows. Generally they vary from 18 to 22 percent protein. In contrast, grain supplements for heifers and cows with mature rumens are lower, about 14 to 16 percent protein. Pre-ruminant calves need lots of protein (both for maintenance and rapid growth). Starter can supplement milk-based proteins.

Some starters contain whole grains or cracked grains. This is different from grain mixes that are made solely of ground grains. Often, individual calf raisers have personal preferences for specific calf starter mixes. One person swears by "X" brand that contains whole rolled corn. Another calf raiser wouldn't feed a starter that contains any pelleted feed. It's difficult to find research data that supports one specific mixture. It is clear from research, however, that calves have to eat the starter for it to do them any good. If on your farm you can get calves to eat one mix better than another, more power to you!

Let's emphasize that point. Calves have to eat the starter to realize the benefits of it. Are you able to think of instances when your calves eat little or no starter? Or, more positively, what can we do to get calves to eat more starter?

First, the starter has to be offered. While few calves under five days of age eat starter, often calves will start eating small amounts before ten days old. Many of us have calf starter in the pen/hutch shortly after birth. This is a "free-choice"

situation. On older calves it's not easy to judge how much to feed. We'd like a calf not to run out of starter and go hungry. But, we don't want to feed a lot of excess, either. Regular, individual observation of calves, especially those three weeks old and under, is an irreplaceable management tool for feeding starter.

Second, we have to maintain palatability. Clearly we have to replace buckets containing urine or feces. Not so clear is the need to replace starter that has turned moldy from exposure to milk, water or saliva. This past month, July, has been hot enough to encourage mold growth in less than twenty-four hours. Daily checks turn up some buckets that smell pretty awful, too. If your calf starter contains any animal proteins or fats, these will spoil faster in hot weather than in winter.

Third, we all have our own tricks in getting the youngest calves to begin eating starter. One calf raiser stops and places grain in the mouths of non-eaters. Another person swears by plastic nipple bottles as grain feeders. Another calf raiser says, "I toss a little starter in their milk bucket just as they are finishing their morning milk." No matter how you like to get them to begin eating starter, research supports the importance of promoting grain consumption. Calves that eat starter gain sooner and faster.

Fourth, calves that eat starter need water. Some of us like to say that the calves that drink the most water eat the most starter. Well, we don't which comes first, water or starter. They do go together. Water is an essential ingredient for the fermentation that takes place in the rumen. Just as the July letter urged, good management means plenty of clean water for growing calves.

CALF FEEDERS' TIP

Both Pam and Sam have a large number of heifers scheduled to freshen in August. One thing we were talking about yesterday was the difference between heifers and cows when they clean off their calves at birth. In our experience, heifers often do less than a complete job of getting their calves licked off. This isn't much a problem in January. But in August the little pockets of amniotic fluid are perfect places for flies to lay their eggs - next step, of course, are pockets of maggots. Our tip? Especially on calves from heifers, check for incomplete clean up by momma. We often have to wipe off the area around the tailhead. This is one case where a little prevention is a whole lot easier than yuckie maggots.

If you know of someone that doesn't currently receive **Calving Ease** but would like to, tell them to **WRITE** to **Calving Ease**, 11047 River Road, Pavilion, NY 14525 or to **CALL** either 585-591-2660 (Attica Vet Assoc. office) or 585-343-8128 (Offhaus Farms Office) or **FAX** (585-591-2898) or **e-mail** sleadley@frontiernet.net or pams91@2ki.net. A limited number of back issues may be accessed on the Internet at www.calfnotes.com and clicking on the link, Calving Ease.