

Calving Ease

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Feeding for Success

Doing a good job of feeding preweaned calves requires following best management practices.

- Keeping all the milk feeding equipment clean to reduce pathogen exposure.
- Feeding the same time every day.
- Monitoring milk feeding temperature to achieve consistency.
- Managing milk or milk replacer for as uniform content as practical.
- Being consistent in amount fed daily.
- Feeding an amount adequate to meet maintenance needs and to achieve the farm's growth goals.
- Starting to feed calf starter grain early.
- Keeping the starter dry and clean.
- Keeping the starter fresh and palatable.

How does water fit into feeding for success?

Water. Even very young calves need to have free-choice water every day. Yes, I have dumped a lot of water pails. On one hand, I know it is frustrating to provide water to calves that do not seem to drink any of it. On the other hand, consider that a young calf may normally only drink a small amount in a day. Regardless of the amount drunk the associated experiences are important – that is, knowing where to find the water and being familiar with the taste.

I usually fed a quart or less at a time to young calves. Most of them drank a little; I dumped the rest. But, when challenged by scours most calves if accustomed to water will voluntarily increase their water intake. Whenever I found an empty water pail for a calf less than two weeks old I snapped a clip on her hutch. That was a flag to remind me or whoever fed water to give her extra water (and, to “keep an eye on her”, too).

Feeding for success also means providing free-choice water at least once a day for all the calves even if we have freezing weather. Remember that water and calf starter grain intakes go hand-in-hand. One complements the other. One estimate is that for optimum feed conversion, a calf needs to drink two quarts of water for every quart of calf starter she eats (by weight, a 4:1 ratio). If you are trying to wean earlier in order to manage milk replacer costs, providing warm water twice daily will promote higher water consumption leading to earlier and higher amounts of starter grain.

If you have not already considered separating the water and grain feeding pails consider looking at the pictures of successful methods to do this at www.atticacows.com, click on Calf Facts and scroll to Water Grain Separation Pictures.

Does the amount of milk fed equal amount consumed?

One of the arguments in favor of feeding milk to calves in bottles is the tight connection between amount fed and amount consumed. With the exception of the “off-feed” calf, the amount we put into the bottle nearly always equals the amount the calf drinks.

In contrast, bucket feeding lacks this tight connection. I made a point this past summer of observing a number of folks bucket training calves. The goal was clear: the calf should learn to drink from a pail. Now, if you have actually done this task you know where the milk goes. Some does go into the calf. And, some goes on the calf, some goes on the ground, some goes on the person. In only one case did I see the caregiver start out with extra milk to compensate for spillage. In all the other instances only the amount the calf was supposed to consume went into the pail. I estimate that the amount that ended inside the calf varied widely but often was less than a quart.

Please do not interpret my comments as bashing caregivers. I’ve bucket trained calves, too. I have limits to my patience. I bet I could count on one hand the number of calves I have successfully bucket trained without spilling milk. Nevertheless, spilled milk provides little nutrition.

However, I think we are farther ahead in feeding for success if we use a little judgment in the bucket training process rather than use a “one-size-fits-all” approach. Whether we have one or forty calves a day to start on pails our goal is still to provide the best nutrition for very young calves.

Win-Win Strategies

When bucket training calves I recommend filling pails with fifty percent more milk than we expect the calf to consume. For example, fill with three quarts if we expect the calf to drink two quarts. This is where the judgment comes into play. My best guess is that for four out of five calves we need to just keep working with them until all the milk is gone – one-third of the milk on us, the calf and the ground and optimistically two-thirds inside the calf. Roughly twenty percent of the calves drink well enough (they are easy to identify – we don’t get a milk bath!) so even if they leave about a quart we can quit fussing with them.

In my opinion the small amount of milk/milk replacer that we dump is far outweighed by feeding for success. That is, by successfully getting an adequate amount of milk into these young calves throughout the bucket training process we are much more likely to keep calves healthy and growing rapidly rather than getting sick before they are two weeks old.

Similar adjustments can be made for calves that consistently bash their milk pails around at feeding time. Rather than cursing at the “dumb” calf a more profitable alternative is simply to feed a little extra for the few weeks the calf is still on milk. The value of the extra milk is very likely considerably less than the potential cost of treating a sick calf especially in challenging weather conditions.

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Holiday Inn
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Wednesday, October 17th, 2007
Rock Garden
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Green Bay, WI

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