

# CALVING EASE

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Sam Leadley (Attica Veterinary Associates) and Pam Sojda (Offhaus Farms)

## Care and Feeding of Calf Raisers

This is a letter for the employers of calf raisers. The calf raisers already know all the ideas in this letter. So, if you are a calf raiser, please give "Care and Feeding of Calf Raisers" to your supervisor and/or employer.

### Rule Number One

When your calf raiser does a good job, be certain to say frequently out loud face-to-face to the calf raiser, "Thank you for doing a good job."

Mature animals do get sick and require acute care at times. Baby calves get sick, too. The difference is that usually the babies get sick more often, more quickly and with worse consequences. This means that your calf raiser has to be extra alert and ready to act quickly when a calf becomes ill. Timely diagnosis and treatment is measured in minutes rather than days. This kind of care calls for lots of flexibility and commitment on the part of the calf care person. Low rates of mortality and morbidity don't just happen. Live healthy calves take time and commitment. Calf raising is very labor intensive. Also, calf raisers have a bond with their calves that is tied to commitment. That's why committed care by calf raisers means not only doing a good job but a little extra, too.

Giving this "little extra, too" over and over again, week after week, month after month is costly for a calf raiser. It means being "up" and alert each time when working with calves so sickness is not overlooked. It means going back to a hutch in the dark with a flashlight to administer an antibiotic to an off-feed calf at the end of a long day in spite of fatigue and a miserable cold wind. It even means crying over a dead calf that didn't make it.

What answer would your calf raiser give if asked when you last complimented them on doing a good job? Would they have to start turning the pages on a calendar to find the right month (or even year)? Their answer should be "today," "yesterday," or "last week."

What's the cost? Your time! Don't have time? Isn't it better to take time rather than wonder why your calf raiser is "down," "discouraged," or quitting? Take time to look at the calves and transition heifers. Ask for reports of how well they are doing (and, of course, look at these reports).

### Rule Number Two

Remember that calves are not little cows. They are different animals from cows in that, their immune systems are just barely functional. Second, they have very few body reserves with which to deal with stress. Third, they are not ruminants.

First, at birth calves are essentially lacking immune resources to fight off viruses, parasites and bacteria. Thus, the owner/operator, supervisor, employer needs to allocate enough labor resources at the right time and place to be certain all calves to be raised get fed lots of good colostrum soon after birth. This single decision by the owner can make or break the quality of a calf-rearing program. Calves with passive transfer failure (too few colostral antibodies in their blood) make calf-raising hell. Calves that get quality newborn care make calf raising heaven.

Second, because at birth calves are essentially lacking immune resources the owner needs to allocate enough labor resources at the right time and place to see that newborn calves are exposed to as little adult cow manure as possible. Excessive exposure to adult cow manure is the single most effective way to kill baby calves. Newborn calves with a high pathogen load make calf raising hell. Calves with limited exposure to adult cow manure make calf raising a lot easier and more rewarding.

Third, because at birth calves are essentially lacking in immune resources the owner needs to give priority to pathogen management rather than materials handling when planning facilities. Giving high priority to materials handling has resulted in appropriately designed adult cow facilities like four and five hundred-foot long six row free stall barns. Same priority for calf raising? No. Proven pathogen management technologies such as “all-in, all-out” sanitation and minimizing airborne pathogens need to have priority over materials handling criteria. If hutches are unacceptable, maybe shorter narrower barns are better suited to pathogen management than long wide ones? Provide age-appropriate facilities.

Fourth, because calves are very sensitive to stress, owners need to provide opportunities for calf raisers to spread out stressful events rather than stack them one on top of each other. For example, stressful events include vaccinations, dehorning, docking tails, tagging, changing feed, changing housing and being handled or restrained. In order to be “efficient” owners often decide that while we are moving calve from hutches to transition pens we will also vaccinate and dehorn them. And, in order to reduce feed costs the feed will be changed from textured starter grain to pelleted grower grain at the same time we change housing. Four stressors at once! Sick calves! They make life hell for a calf/heifer raiser.

Fifth, because calves are not yet ruminants owners need to provide for labor, product and facilities that promote quality feeding routines without superhuman efforts. Provide enough hot water to thoroughly clean milk feeding equipment. Provide enough hot water to insure that either milk or milk replacer can be fed at a calf body temperature all seasons of the year. If milk replacer is fed, provide a quality milk replacer (all milk protein and all animal fat) in a quantity to meet calves needs even in the coldest winter weather. Provide quality starter grain so that calves eat it early in life and develop strong rumens. Provide enough labor to feed water to calves all year round.

### **Bottom Line**

Committed calf raisers are a rare breed. They need lots of support and encouragement. As a team the owner and calf raiser have the potential to do a great job of raising the next generation of cows that are ready to milk.

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@frontier.net](mailto:sleadley@frontier.net). A limited number of back issues may be accessed on the Internet at [www.calfnotes.com](http://www.calfnotes.com) and clicking on the link, Calving Ease. PLEASE NOTE THE NEW WEB SITE ADDRESS FOR CALF NOTES.