

Hot Weather Calf Care Tips

Hot weather and calves don't go together: think of oil and water. Calves thrive in cool weather. Calves have a hard time coping with hot weather. They consider anything above 50° warm. Weather above 70° is just plain hot for them.

Providing a Cooler Environment

If your calves are housed in a barn or shed, the answer is ventilation. Fans, open curtain walls, natural convection are all ways to move air indoors.

If your calves are housed in hutches, be sure any vents built into the hutches are open. Some calf managers have situations where the backs of hutches can be raised 6 to 8 inches to provide ventilation at bedding level.

Providing lots of clean water

Remember, milk replacer does not provide water for the rumen to promote fermentation of calf starter grains; the milk goes directly into the abomasum bypassing the rumen. Remember the 1 to 4 rule for water feeding. For each 1 pound of calf starter grain fed, provide at least 4 pounds (2 quarts) of water.

Older calves eating calf starter grains need plenty of clean water in order to efficiently ferment their feed and to carry the rumen contents on into the other stomach compartments. I provided 5-gallon pails of water for my calves the last two weeks they were in hutches rather than filling smaller pails more than once a day.

In hot weather, even more water is used by calves to maintain normal body temperatures.

Offering ad-lib water is repaid by increased calf comfort, increased weight gains and improved health. But, unpalatable water doesn't count as ad-lib water. Water containers need to be emptied frequently.

Research has demonstrated a 0.6 to 0.75 pound/week increase in live-weight gain when water is kept clean and fresh compared to just adding water to a murky bucket. Algae deposits grow quickly in hot weather and need to be scrubbed out of water buckets. During summer months for my own calves I scheduled scrubbing 1/5 of my water buckets daily (once a week) in order to keep them clean.

Providing palatable calf starter grains

Begin with a good quality calf starter grains. Choose a calf starter grain with as low a rate of fines as you can afford. Try to get one with good pellet quality – look for most of the pellets remaining still intact after a day in a calf starter grain bucket.

Remember that in hot weather the fats in calf starter grains can turn rancid very quickly. For the youngest calves I have always fed only a handful of calf starter grain at any one time and changed it daily. One purpose of renewing it every day for the youngest calves is to avoid the rancid smell. Also, this provides a fresh aroma that attracts calves.

Containers for older calves need daily attention, too. Even small amounts of liquid (water, milk, and urine) in grain provide a favorable environment for mold growth. Calves seem to be quite sensitive to moldy odors. Fresh calf starter grain simply added on top of moldy calf starter grain often goes uneaten. Thus, dumping grain pails at least once a week is a best management practice.

Taking advantage of cooler evening temperatures

Even strong, healthy calves merit extra attention in hot weather. Most young calves spend more than 80% of their time lying down regardless of the weather.

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This percentage of time lying down increases during hot daytime hours. When calves are resting they are not eating. In the summer with long days and short nights many calf managers observe the highest rates of calf starter grain intake are between 6pm and 6am. That's when the calves are up and more active.

This means that calf managers need to take extra care to see that calves have enough supplies of both fresh calf starter grains and water between 5pm and 7am. Promoting earlier and greater calf starter grain consumption pays off in decreasing post-weaning slump.

Caring for chronically sick calves

Calves that get too little poor quality colostrum too late seem to get scours at the least little thing and often have to be treated for respiratory illness. They will take longer to begin eating calf starter grains.

If chronically sick calves are observed carefully, you can delay starting to wean them until they have been consistently eating some measureable amount of calf starter grain for at least 2 weeks. These extra days before starting weaning will permit more maturation of the rumen lining and walls.

I like to see consistent grain consumption in the range of 4 to 5 pounds (about the same number of quarts) before stopping all milk feeding. Then, when weaned, these calves will not only be able to digest calf starter grains and absorb these nutrients but also are eating enough grain to meet their daily needs for energy and protein.

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