

CALVING EASE

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Know the Facts About Your Calves

It helps to have a head for details if you care for calves. Knowing lots of little things about where calves are born, newborn care, neonatal environment, caregivers and calf health histories can contribute to the “big picture” when making management decisions.

Getting Started

All of your calves may be born in one place. Or, in numerous places. No matter which is true, keep informed about the likelihood of pathogen exposure, especially before colostrum is fed. My calves were all born in one place but pathogen exposure varied a lot from month to month. Do you have months where the facilities are crowded, not cleaned as often as they should be; bedding or stalls are not as well cared for as we would like to see? Yes? On the “bad” months be prepared to invest extra time in diagnosing and treating sick calves. Act rather than react.

If there is a turnover in staff providing newborn care, inexperienced persons filling in for vacations, or peak labor demands that draw labor away from newborn care expect issues with passive transfer failure. On one hand, try to focus some extra experienced help on newborns to fill the gaps. On the other hand, if the problem doesn't look fixable at least right now think through ahead of time how you are going to deal with the passive-transfer-failure calves. Have a protocol worked out with your veterinarian and appropriate medications on hand – don't wait until the third calf has died this week.

Big Stuff We Can't Change

Big stuff we can't change has to include the weather if we have calves housed out-of-doors or in naturally ventilated barns. In the colder climates it makes sense to pay attention to the weather. Even calves housed in individual hutches are vulnerable to wide temperature swings. Where I raised calves once the weather got cold enough so a water pail would have a skim of ice on it in the morning I began tracking weather carefully. Under these conditions whenever we had more than a 30° variation over a 24 hour period I started watching like a hawk for pneumonia calves. Calves were accustomed to freezing weather. Then daytime temperatures shoot up to 55 or 65 degrees. Their hair coats get damp, they get chilled at night, immune competence is threatened, borderline-health calves cannot deal with the stress, pneumonia-causing bacteria start growing at a great rate in the lungs in these calves, and in less than 24 hours we have a sick calf.

Stuff We Can Control

Ever take medication out to treat a calf with a navel infection and, once you get there you think, “Now, is this the last injection or is tomorrow the last day?” Oh, those important records. The calendar, a spiral notebook, 3 x 5 cards, memo on your cell phone – doesn’t make any difference which ones you use but write all this stuff down. Record it all the time. Even if you have as few as five calves on milk eventually someone else is going to have to be the caregiver. Some of us with larger numbers of calves use zip ties marked with tag pen to track treatments and drugs. Others use a desk-size calendar (a BIG one). Some folks use colored duct tape to track treated calves and treatments.

The same record keeping is needed for vaccinations. We do not want to let calves “slip through the slats” and move along without the prescribed injections. Some ways to keep a record are: Put in the second ear tag when she is vaccinated. Notch her ear tag. Put the numbers in DC305. Find a way to keep a record.

A five-day old calf is fussy drinking her milk this feeding even though she has been eating well all along. How can we focus attention on her the next feeding? “Well,” you say, “I’ll remember to check on her in the morning.” Even if you had only one calf think of all the things that can happen the next morning to take your attention away from properly checking to see that she drinks properly. Nope, it doesn’t work – “I’ll just remember” has an unacceptably high failure rate when caring for vulnerable young calves. I always carried a supply of inexpensive metal cargo clips in my pocket during feeding time to mark these calves. Some folks carry colored clothes pins. Another producer carries a supply of colored surveyor tape that can be tied to a hutch fence. Another producer has a surveyor’s flag (the kind on a wire used to mark tile lines) attached to each hutch that can be flipped up when a calf is not acting normally.

Not every person that cares for calves is a model of responsibility. Once in while a person like this does fill in for a missing staff person when mixing and feeding equipment has to be cleaned. Let’s face it. All of us eventually get stuck using this kind of help. Of several persons that helped me with this cleaning I had one person that tended to “cut corners.” Whenever they cleaned equipment I knew if I wanted to avoid a scours problem two days later I had deal with high bacterial regrowth on equipment. I planned on extra time the next feeding to rewash tube feeders and bottles and use a strong hot sanitizing rinse on all the rest of the mixing and feeding equipment. Sometimes you have to live with what you cannot change in the short run.

Bottom Line? Pay attention to the small details that add up to the big picture in calf care. They define our opportunities to move up from average to excellent calf management.

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 **CALL** 585-591-2660 (Attica Vet Assoc. office) or **FAX** 585-591-2898, or **e-mail** sladley@frontiernet.net. Back issues may be accessed on the Internet at www.atticacows.com, click on the Resources menu, select Calf Management Newsletter.

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