

CONCENTRATE INTAKE AND MILK FEEDING

How should a calf rearer balance milk replacer and concentrate feeding?

On one hand, we want to feed enough milk or milk replacer long enough to be sure calves mature rapidly. That way they stay healthy.

On the other hand, we don't want to feed too much milk replacer too long and unnecessarily delay concentrate intake and rumen development. That way they stay healthy.

Living on milk replacer until rumen develops

The balancing act for any calf rearer is to seek the right ration for calves at different stages of development.

Until the lining of the rumen has developed enough to absorb nutrients from grain fermentation, the calf has to live on milk or milk replacer. That rumen growth process takes a minimum of about three weeks. Remember, those 3 weeks start after a heifer begins eating a handful of concentrate daily and has access to water.

Lots of natural variation among calves

On the average calves fed about 570g/day of milk replacer powder probably will begin this regular starter concentrate intake at about 14 days of age.

But there is a lot of variation around this average. Some of these calves were seen to start eating concentrate regularly at 1 week of age. Others on the same milk ration didn't begin regular intake until they were nearly 3 weeks old.

Higher rates of milk replacer feeding delay concentrate intake

Calves with higher rates of milk replacer feeding can be expected to start regular concentrate intake later.

Our observations suggest that at 850g/day of milk replacer powder, the start of a significant concentrate intake averaged 18 days.

When we were feeding 1.3kg/day of milk replacer powder, initial regular concentrate intake was delayed until 26 days of age.

Remember, however, that a great deal of variation was present in all feeding groups. A few calves begin much earlier and some start much later than the average.

You may wish to review the content of the May 2017 issue of the calf management newsletter on improving weaning results. Click [HERE](#) for this issue.

No substitute for daily observation of calves

Averages give us an idea of what to expect. Maybe they suggest what is 'normal'. That's the animal science side of management.

But, there is no substitute for good stockmanship – one must watch calves individually. When weaning a heifer, it's important to know that she, as an individual animal, has been regularly eating some concentrates for at least 3 weeks. Then we are fairly certain that she has the rumen developed enough to make the switch to dry feeds without excessive stress.

It's important to combine solid animal science with good stockmanship to achieve superior calf management.