

Calves that Just Don't Suck

Frustration. That's what we have with a newborn calf that won't suck. The most common reason for a weak sucking response is a hard birth. Either the calf is severely traumatized and/or has an acutely swollen muzzle and tongue.

We recommend feeding four quarts of clean high quality colostrum with an esophageal or tube feeder as soon as possible after birth.

If the calf is strong enough she will benefit greatly if you take time to get her standing and dried off. Getting the calf to stand and drying her off is likely to increase her metabolism substantially higher than her resting level.

If the calf is unable to stand, get her up on her chest and hold her there before inserting the esophageal tube. Tube feeding in this upright position is much less likely to spill colostrum into the windpipe (trachea) than with the calf lying on her side.

As a precaution with these immune-suppressed calves we often use supplementary injections of selenium and vitamin E as well as vitamin B within the first 24 hours. Discuss this possible treatment with your veterinarian along with a recommended treatment level appropriate for your farm.

A few calves have persistent sucking problems in spite of careful care and supplementary injections. When this problem is combined with inability to stand, ask your veterinarian to examine the calf for a possible complications arising from a late gestation BVD infection in her dam. Some of these calves are pretty hopeless cases.

The majority of the calves that are not sick will come around after one or two days of tube feeding. Feeding with a tube feeder more than two days is not recommended. However, there will be one or two calves out of five hundred that don't learn to suck. They never learn to suck on a nipple.

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But, maybe they can learn to drink. They might respond to bucket training. I learned that sometimes they will drink first with just plain water or water with an electrolyte in it. Then, they can progress to drinking milk or milk replacer from a pail. While this is hard fussy work it is worth a try to save a calf.