

Weaning Calves Housed in Individual Pens: Four Management Strategies

Least management intensive

Feed a uniform amount of milk or milk replacer to all calves (often as little as two quarts twice a day). For all the calves that survive the first four weeks delay weaning until calves are about ten to twelve weeks of age.

Abruptly stop feeding milk to all calves. Usually all of the calves are eating at least four quarts of starter grain daily; many calves are eating much more grain than this.

Calves are often moved to group housing the same time they are weaned and free-choice forage is introduced for the first time. Often, three or more calves out of ten will require medical treatment for weaning stress-induced pneumonia.

A little more management intensive

Feed a uniform amount of milk or milk replacer to all calves (often as little as two quarts twice a day). For all the calves that survive the first four weeks wean calves around eight to nine weeks of age.

At eight weeks start observing grain consumption. Abruptly stop feeding milk to all calves that are regularly eating starter grain. Continue milk feeding if a calf is eating less than four quarts of grain daily.

Usually less than one calf out of ten will require additional time before weaning. Calves are often kept in the individual housing for a few days after weaning.

When moved to group housing free-choice forage is introduced for the first time. Only about two calves out of ten will require medical treatment for weaning stress-induced pneumonia.

Much more management intensive

Feed a uniform amount of milk or milk replacer to all calves (often as little as two quarts twice a day). For all the calves that survive the first four weeks wean calves around seven to eight weeks of age.

At six weeks start observing grain consumption. Either gradually or abruptly stop feeding milk to all calves that are regularly eating at least four quarts of grain daily for three or four days in a row. Continue milk feeding until a calf is regularly eating this much grain.

Usually less than one calf out of eight will require additional time prior to weaning. Hold calves in individual housing for five to seven days after weaning.

When moved to group housing free-choice forage is introduced for the first time. Only about one calf out of ten will require medical treatment for weaning stress-induced pneumonia.

Most management intensive

Feed milk or milk replacer in proportion to the size of the calf (usually starts at two quarts twice a day at birth and increases to about four or more quarts twice a day by three weeks of age). This has been called “intensive” or “accelerated” feeding.

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The success of increased milk feeding rates is tied to strictly following proper sanitation procedures. Feeding larger amounts of milk or milk replacer contaminated with bacteria always makes calves sick. A superior quality colostrum management program will help insure the success of this feeding program. See also “Feeding More Milk without Scours” at www.calffacts.com.

No set age for weaning. At three weeks start observing grain consumption (you want to know both how long the calf has been eating grain and how much consumed daily before starting to wean).

When grain consumption has been regular for two weeks (usually during fourth or fifth week) reduce milk feeding to one-half or about four to five quarts daily. Most calf operations save the most labor by dropping one milk feeding. And, grain intake will increase more rapidly on once-a-day feeding compared to twice-a-day feeding.

Stop feeding milk completely when a calf is regularly eating four or more quarts of starter grain daily for three or four days in a row. Calves should be expected to vary widely at this point. A few are ready to wean at thirty-five days while most of the others are not ready until forty-two to forty-nine days.

Hold calves in individual housing for five to seven days after weaning as practical. When moved to group housing gradually introduce forages over the first two weeks in groups. Less than one calf out of twenty is likely to require medical treatment for weaning stress-induced pneumonia.

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