

Dehorning Calves

Summary:

- **Earlier is better than later. When using paste try to complete the process during the first week. When hot iron cauterizing 3 to 4 weeks of age is a good time.**
- **Use a local anesthetic and remember that more restraint is safer for both the animal and the person than less restraint.**
- **Less stress is better than more stress. Isolate dehorning from other stresses.**

During the past several years I have been collecting observations about this dehorning process that may help us make this job a little less odious for us and less stressful for the calves. You may find it helpful to access this summary about dehorning by Dr. Amy Stanton, University of Wisconsin [click [HERE](#) to go to the Stanton resource].

Earlier is better than later

When using paste for dehorning most dairy producers choose to apply the paste during the first week of age. Click [HERE](#) for a short video clip demonstrating the process. If you cannot use this link search for Vita Plus calf dehorning.

Surgical or heat cauterization can be done between 3 and 4 weeks of age. While dehorning can be done closer to 8 to 10 weeks of age the stress on both the calves and workers is much higher.

Three weeks is beyond the most vulnerable age when calves are making the transition from passive immunity from colostrum to their own protective antibodies. And, 4 weeks is early enough to minimize the amount of tissue damage necessary to prevent horn development.

At this age range the amount of tissue removal when surgically dehorning is limited to the horn bud. A small gouge tool is normally all that is necessary. Heat cauterization can be effective with only a narrow band of cauterized tissue.

Earlier dehorning adds up to less stress for the calf both at dehorning and in the immediate period after the procedure.

And, handling younger calves is considerably less destructive on the caretaker staff than waiting until the heifers are between 200 and 300 pounds.

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More restraint works better than less restraint

The best kind of restraint is that which prevents injury to either the calf or the caretaker. Our veterinary technicians and I have talked about various restraint methods. We both have used halters. Their effectiveness is limited by the opportunities to tie up the calf. Although, in a few instances cross tying the calf with 2 halters has worked.

Muzzle restraint units with the restraint that goes behind the ears works well when it can be attached securely to a stable plank. Where available, the combination of a headlock and halter keeps the calf in 1 place with her head turned 1 direction and then the other.

Not nearly as much physical restraint is needed if a local anesthetic (for example, lidocaine) is used to numb the horn bud area before dehorning (the corneal branch of the zygomaticotemporal nerve). Click [HERE](#) and scroll down to “Blocking the Nerve to the Horn.” for a diagram showing placement of the anesthetic. This resource has an excellent visual showing drug placement.

Ask your veterinarian about additional pain relief measures including oral medication.

When several calves are dehorned at one time, our practice is for the person doing the dehorning to give the anesthetic to about five calves in sequence. Then, in the same order they receive the anesthetic, the calves are dehorned.

As each calf is dehorned, the person goes to the next non-injected calf, restrains her and gives the anesthetic. Then go back and dehorn the next calf. This back-and-forth procedure gives about the right amount of time for the calves to “numb up” enough to be docile while dehorning.

Our experience suggests that between 5 to 10 minutes between injecting the local anesthetic and cauterizing works well to effectively numb the horn bud area. The greater the accuracy of drug injection the more rapid and complete the numbing effect.

Fewer stresses are better than more stresses

Unfortunately, sometimes dehorning takes place at the convenience of the staff. For example, when animals are being moved from individual pens to group housing. Adding one more stress to those already present is not a good management practice.

It is a best management practice to avoid any changes in a calf’s routine just before and for a week after she is dehorned. As we learn more about the effects of stress on a calf’s immune competence, we know that there are lingering consequences of stress events.

Effects of stress linger – during the following week watch these calves for symptoms of pneumonia

Even 7 to 10 days after a stress event (dehorning, change in feed, change in housing, being loaded and unloaded from a livestock trailer, injection of a vaccine) we can measure lowered levels of her immune defenses. Thus, the calf is especially vulnerable to respiratory illness in this period.