

Common Pitfalls When Raising Young Dairy Heifers

by Donna M. Amaral-Phillips

1 Are you getting adequate colostrum into newborn baby calves?

Why is this important? Calves are born without antibodies to fight off diseases. They must absorb antibodies during the first day of life. During the first day of life, the ability to absorb antibodies decreases rapidly and by 12 hours is about a third of the rate at birth. Calves that do not receive adequate antibodies through colostrum, are more likely to get sick (known as higher rate of morbidity) and are more likely to die (higher mortality rates).

Take-Home Points: Calves should be hand-fed 2 to 3 quarts of colostrum within 4 to 6 hours after birth. Calves that nurse their dams often times do not receive adequate amounts of colostrum and have higher rates of sickness and death. The quality or antibody content of colostrum should be checked using a colostrometer. Calves should be removed from their dam at birth and placed in a draft-free, individual hutch or pen.

2 Are calves on milk or milk replacer being fed water free-choice with their calf starter?

Why is this important? When calves are fed milk either in a bucket or through a nipple bottle or pail, the esophageal groove forms a funnel which directs milk directly from the esophagus into the calf's true stomach or abomasum. Milk does not enter the calf's rumen. In direct contrast, when calves drink water, it goes directly into the rumen. Calf starter (grain mix specially formulated for baby calves) and water is needed for optimal development of the rumen so that your calf can digest forages. In a research trial, calves that were fed water with their calf starter gained 38% more weight than those who did not receive water free-choice.

Take-Home Points: Water should be fed free-choice to baby calves in addition to calf starter starting at 4 days of age. Hay is not fed until calves are weaned and calves are eating 4 to 5 lbs of calf starter.

3 Does your calf and heifer grain mix contain Deccox®, Rumensin® or Bovatec®?

Why is this important? These feed additives can help prevent coccidiosis, a disease which can cause diarrhea in young animals. Deccox® (chemical name is decoquinate) is generally used in some milk replacers and calf starters and is not used in grain mixes for older heifers. Rumensin® and Bovatec® are ionophores and can be used in heifer grain mixes as well as calf starters. Besides preventing coccidiosis in heifers, the addition of Rumensin® or Bovatec® to a heifer's grain mix results in more efficient "digestion" within the heifer's rumen and research has shown approximately 0.1 lb more daily weight gain with heifers calving 30 days earlier.

Take-Home Points: Check to see that your dairy heifer grain mix includes Rumensin® or Bovatec®.

4 Are heifers under 400 lbs housed in small groups of similar size and weight?

Why is this important? For the first month after weaning, calves should be housed in very small groups of 3 to 5 heifers per group. By housing heifers in small groups, they can learn to socialize with each other and to compete for feed and water with minimal competition. As heifers get older, the size of the group can be increased. However, to assure optimum growth, heifers under 6 months of age should be housed in groups of less than 8 heifers per group and they should be within 75 lbs of body weight. Males should be fed and housed separately from heifers.