

# **Managing the Future of the Dairy Herd- Baby Calves**

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Proper and timely management of dairy calves is critical in getting them off to a good start. Calves should be born in a clean environment to prevent mastitis in the dam and to prevent the calf from ingesting manure and disease-causing bacteria.

## **Importance of Colostrum**

One of the most important steps to increase the survival and health of calves is the timely feeding of adequate amounts of colostrum. Calves are born without any immunity against disease. They receive their immunity from colostrum- the mother's first milk. Calves which do not receive adequate amounts of quality colostrum are more susceptible to diseases. Holstein calves should be hand fed 5 to 6 pints or 3 quarts of good quality colostrum within an hour of life. Feeding 6 pints of colostrum will not cause a Holstein calf to get scours. Often, farmers let calves nurse their dam. Research has shown that many of these calves do not nurse adequate amounts of colostrum from their dams within the first few hours of life and, thus, may not receive adequate immunity to fight off diseases.

## **Ventilation Important**

Calves should be housed in facilities with very good ventilation. Calf hutches do prevent the spread of disease from one calf to another. Farmers who have tried calf hutches will never go back to an older barn. Also, research has shown that calf hutches should be shaded in the summer to reduce heat stress and to help improve the immune system of calves.

## **Calf Starter Important for Rumen Development**

Besides feeding calves milk or milk replacer, calf starter should be fed to calves starting at 4 days of age. Calf starter should be formulated to include very palatable ingredients and contain adequate protein, minerals and vitamins. In addition, water should be provided free-choice. The calf starter along with water helps the rumen of the calf develop. Hay should not be fed until they are weaned and/or they are 8 weeks of age.

The first two weeks of life, calves will just nibble the calf starter. They should be given no more than a 6 oz.- coffee cup of starter daily with the refused feed removed daily and fed to older heifers. Intakes of the starter increase the third to fourth weeks of life. Calves can be weaned from milk when they are eating 1.5 to 2 lbs. of starter for three days in a row. Thus, calves should not be weaned based on age but rather they should be weaned based on the intake of a starter. Thus, some calves can be weaned at 4 weeks of age whereas others will be 10 weeks of age.

## **Weaning Calves**

After the calf is eating 1.5 to 2 lbs of calf starter, milk can be cut in half for a couple of days and then milk removed. When the amount of milk is reduced, the intake of starter will increase tremendously. Changes in how a weaned calf is fed and housed should be made one change at a time over the next couple of weeks.

Raising baby calves requires time and the commitment to details to get them off to a good start.