



Calf care for healthy animals

An alert, bright eyed calf with a shiny coat that eats well and actively plays is a rewarding site which reflects the success of a farm.

When it comes to calf health, our adage applies as usual... prevention of dis-ease is better than cure and knowing what to look for and how to successfully address any problems that arise early on will go a long way to boosting quality production.

Calf health is promoted first and foremost by ensuring that these young animals have healthy mothers. A healthy cow that has been fed on balanced pastures with the correct feed additives is likely to carry and give birth to a healthy calf and is also able to transfer valuable immunity from disease onto her offspring.

After delivery, it is of vital importance that a newly born calf receives colostrum (the first milk) from its mother within one to twelve hours after birth. Colostrum contains many vital nutrients, the most valuable being immunoglobulins which are essential to help the young animal to effectively combat infection.

Calves must have sufficient feed intake to support their growth and development. Naturally reared calves or those who suckle on nurse cows grow quickly and generally do very well. Management systems which rear calves separately from their mothers must ensure that when feeding milk, calves aren't overfed or underfed, that the correct milk is used and that any dietary changes are made slowly.

Adverse weather conditions can be detrimental to calf health so providing warmth and shelter in paddocks or in buildings to protect them from cold and wet weather is imperative.

Hygiene is another key component to raising healthy calves. Paddocks should be clean and the buildings where calves are housed must be regularly disinfected to prevent the build up of bacteria which can cause calves to become ill. Any utensils used in calf rearing must be clean and sick animals should be removed from the group to prevent the spread of disease. These buildings should also have a quarantine area for new calves that enter the property in case they are harboring disease.

Signs of ill health include dull eyes and coat, poor appetite, disinterest, shivering, a tucked up appearance, labored breathing or coughing and wheezing, scouring (diarrhea) and pale mucous membrane colour. One of the most common problems that calves develop is scouring which can be due to a variety of causes including viral, bacterial and protozoal diseases as well as worm infestations and even nutritional factors such as cold milk feeding and changes in food type and volume.

Scouring can lead to dehydration, the loss of body salts, low energy, dropped body temperature and ultimately death. If you notice scouring, act quickly by immediately feeding the calf a good quality electrolyte solution to replace lost water, body salts and energy helping to support the calf. Isolate the infected calf and seek veterinary advice if necessary.

A healthy calf kept in a healthy environment will have good immunity and will therefore be much less susceptible to diseases and parasites such as worms and lice. These animals will boost productivity many fold and contribute greatly to the general long term well-being of the herd.