

Getting a good start for calves

Ensuring calves maintain good gut health can have a big impact on rearing performance and costs. British Dairying looks at how to get calves off to the best start.

A calf never gets over a bad start to life, which is why focusing on early calf management plays such an important role in ensuring high quality heifers enter the herd, with a lower age at first calving and reduced total rearing costs.

“It is widely proven that heavier calves and those that grow faster up to weaning get in-calf more quickly, produce more milk in their first lactation and stay in the herd longer, making them more profitable cows,” says David Wilde, National Ruminant Technical Manager at Massey Harpers Feeds.

“Most dairy farmers understand the importance of ensuring sufficient colostrum and achieving high intakes of a quality milk replacer to drive pre-weaning performance. But there has been less emphasis on management around weaning itself, and



Good calf management is crucial for maintaining gut health

the crucial role of maintaining good gut health in calves.”

Good gut health is essential to ensure optimum use of dietary nutrients and to help reduce the consequences of scours, says David. A healthy gut has a more robust and better developed gut wall and more beneficial microbial populations. The

gut wall is better able to withstand pathogenic bacteria, and as the gut contains around 50% of an animal's total immune system, a healthy gut will generally ensure healthier calves.

“Good gut health is vital for pre- and immediately post-weaned calves. If we can keep the gut healthy and ensure calves are settled on dry feeds before weaning it is possible to improve performance, reduce the risk of growth rate checks at weaning and keep them growing rapidly.”

Ensuring good intakes of dry feed is crucial, says David. “Calves should be offered concentrates from two to three days old and need to be eating at least 1.5kg/day for at least three days before being weaned.”

Rumen development

Dry feeds are important for rumen development and the establishment of effective rumen fermentation, but clean water also needs to be available. “While milk bypasses the rumen, water goes into the rumen and helps initiate fermentation.

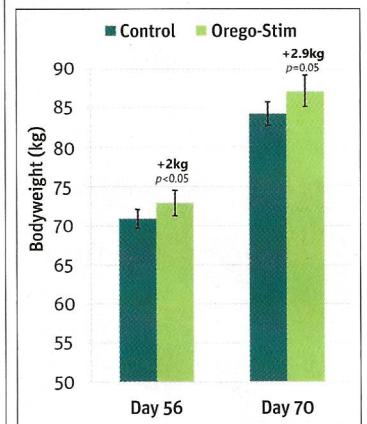
“The more we can do to encourage calf starter intakes, the better the rumen will develop and the better we can maintain good gut health,” he explains. “This is an area where many additives have been promoted, but often they have no data or trials to back them up. Massey Harpers will be including two proven additives in its milk powders and calf starter feeds to help improve calf gut health.”

Bio-Mos is a yeast outer cell wall sugar fraction, to which pathogenic bacteria stick in the gut, meaning they cannot attach to the gut lining and instead are ejected in the dung. “Preventing pathogenic bacteria from breeding and attaching to the

gut wall is a vital way to maintain gut integrity and function,” says David. “Another product we will be including is Orego-Stim, which contains a specific oregano oil. This disrupts the cell membrane of pathogenic bacteria, causing them to die and helping to maintain a healthy bacterial population in the gut.”

Oregano oil also has a pleasant flavour, stimulating calves to consume more, says David. “By including it in both milk replacer and starter feeds, calves will be encouraged to move more enthusiastically onto starter feeds, achieving the daily intakes required for effective weaning with a well-developed rumen.”

In a trial at the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute in Belfast, calves were fed milk replacer either with, or without Orego-Stim. Calves on the supplemented milk grew faster and were heavier. It has also been shown that calves offered the product visit automatic milk feeders more often and have faster intakes of calf starter.

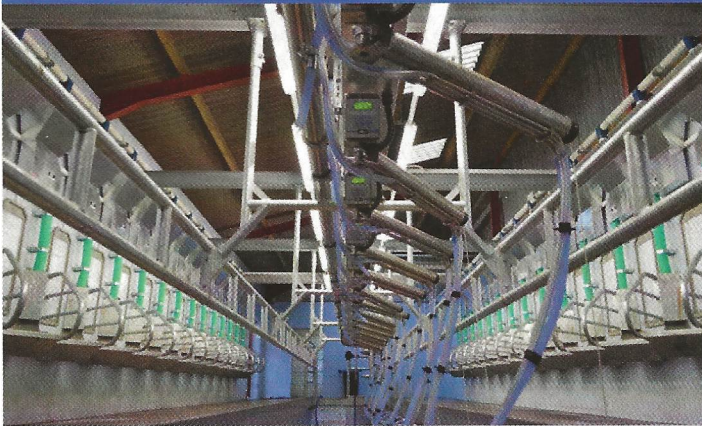


Control versus Orego-Stim

“Ensuring everything is done to support early life gut health will pay dividends in the future life of the heifer,” says David. “Achieving higher concentrate intakes pre-weaning, combined with a well-developed rumen and good gut health will help calves continue to grow quickly after weaning.

“Including scientifically proven additives backed with reliable data is one way to help support normal gut function,” he adds. “If offered feeds with an additive, ask to see the trial data and check the product is included at the same rate.”

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