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Management of Young Calves for the Small Scale Hobbyist Part 1: New Born Calf

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Care of the Newborn Calf

A newborn calf is a very vulnerable animal and can be more susceptible to disease. Great care is required in nurturing it through the first very critical 6 to 8 weeks of life. Whether born on your place or purchased, the calf represents an investment you cannot afford to lose. Your initial care of the newborn calf greatly influences its performance in the following weeks and even years. Here are some tips that will help you be successful.

1. Start with the mother. She must receive proper nutrition before calving. Deficiencies in the diet may reduce the nutritive value of the first milk available to the calf (colostrum). Colostrum provides needed immunity and nutrition for the newborn calf (Heinrichs). Calves not receiving adequate colostrum will be at risk for disease until their own immunity can ramp up by approximately 2 to 3 months of age. If you purchase the calf off farm you may not have much opportunity to influence what the mother receives. You can inquire about the quality and amount of colostrum the previous owner provided for the calf.

2. Provide a clean, dry place for calving (Gold Standards I; McGuirk, 2011). Proper sanitation is important. Some dairymen who regularly put their cows in unclean pens have higher losses than if they used no pens at all. Maternity pens which are continuously used without cleaning have a build-up of disease-causing bacteria which come from manure, decayed placentas and dirty bedding. After each calving, the maternity stall should be cleaned and disinfected immediately, then kept free of any bedding or animals. In summer, calving outdoors in fresh grass is ideal. If you have the opportunity, observe the condition of the maternity area for the farm the calf

is being purchased from. Calves bought at auction will not afford you the opportunity to inquire.

3. Get the cow into the maternity pen at least a day ahead of calving. This is not easy because the cow can't tell you she is going into labor, so you need to watch for signs of approaching labor.

4. After birth, clean the excess mucus from the calf's nose and mouth with clean hands or clean towel.

5. Dip the calf's complete navel into a cup containing tincture of iodine solution (7% iodine in alcohol).

6. Clean the cow's udder and milk out as much colostrum as possible. Put it into a bottle and feed the calf at least 4 quarts (~10% of body weight) within the first 6 hours, preferably within the first 1 hour. The purpose is to get natural antibodies from the colostrum into the calf before the bacteria enter from the environment. Remember, the calf has just left the sterile environment of the cow's uterus and is very susceptible to disease. Feed colostrum for 2 or 3 days.

7. Put the calf in a warm, dry, clean stall at the time it is removed from the cow.

8. After colostrum feeding, switch to milk or milk replacer. There are some great milk replacers on the market which have proven results. Unfortunately, we occasionally see "off brand" milk replacers show up in the market place. While they may be less expensive, the quality control may not be proven nor will they have a reputable company which stands behind their product. This is not an area or time of life to be cheap with. Some milk replacers contain a small amount of antibiotics in

them. We generally recommend that non-medicated milk replacers be used unless there is a chronic, diagnosed bacterial diarrhea that is responsive to medicated milk replacer and after we have improved husbandry and sanitation. Talk with your veterinarian if you have a chronic diarrhea issue. It might be a viral disease that will not respond to antibiotics.



References

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