

3.1 Calf rearing - extra effort now will pay dividends later

To set a dairy cow up for a long, productive life you must give her the best possible start. Extra effort now will pay dividends throughout her milking life.

Well grown heifers make much more successful milking cows, and growing them well starts from the day they are born.

Best practice in calf rearing

- All calves, including bobbies must receive adequate fresh colostrum within the first 24 hours of life and should be fed colostrum, or a colostrum substitute, for at least the first four days of life
- Always handle calves gently and with care. Do not allow anyone to throw, hit or drag a calf at any time
- Electric prodders must not be used on calves
- Calves that are not with their dams must be provided with shelter so that they can stay warm and dry
- Calf pens must be fit for purpose and well maintained. Bedding areas must be comfortable, clean and dry, with adequate ventilation to ensure that ammonia gas does not build up. Exposed concrete, bare earth and mud are not acceptable
- Calves should be fed at the same times each day to minimise stress
- Always ensure your calves have access to large quantities of clean water
- Feed calves well to rapidly achieve weaning weight with a well developed rumen
- As well as milk, or milk replacer, always have hay and meal available as this helps speed the maturity of the rumen and allows earlier weaning.

Ensure good routine hygiene practices

- Scrub all feeding equipment well with hot water and detergent
- Spray pens weekly with a broad spectrum disinfectant
- Frequently clean and disinfect pens where sick calves are treated
- Remove sick calves promptly to a sick bay.

Make regular health checks

Calves must be checked twice daily for signs of ill-health, and treatment given if any fall ill.

Check that:

- Noses are clear of discharges, and are moist and cool
- Calves are alert and have responsive ears, with no infection around the ear tag
- Navels are clear of infection
- Mouths are clear of ulcers
- Calves have shiny, supple coats
 - If a calf's pinched skin is slow to return to normal it may be dehydrated and need electrolytes
- You vaccinate, treat for parasites and provide access to shelter
- You control the spread of disease. Calves of the same age should stay in the same pen. However, small or unthrifty calves may be better off with a younger group.

Weaning calves successfully onto pasture

- Wean calves at target weight
 - Achieving a measured target weight is more effective than using age or guesswork
 - Weaning weight will depend on the rearing system used. Friesian calves reared on restricted milk and adlib meal system can be weaned at a minimum of 63kg. Calves reared on a high milk system can be weaned at a minimum of 75–80kg.
- Keep feeding meal
 - Once on pasture, provide them with up to 2kg/head of meal daily. Reduce this over the next few months.
- Check weights after a few weeks
 - Occasionally weaners will not thrive on the new feeding regime and will need continued access to meal.

