



By Teresa Hanson, B.S.

Post-Weaned Calf Management

Calf raising should be fun! As I travel around to different dairy farms, my main focus is on the lactating and dry cows. However, many of the producers I have visited also show me their post-weaned calves. Some of these producers are frustrated, or almost embarrassed, to show me this group of animals but realize they need help. Post-weaned calves in these groups often have a rough hair coat, ringworm, a cough, loose manure, poor weight gains and look unthrifty. Calves and heifers do not have to look this way. Simple preventative measures can go a long way in addressing some of these issues and significantly improve the performance and appearance of post-weaned calves.

There are some challenges relating to post-weaned calves that make this group of animals especially vulnerable. For example:

1. Young/Naïve Immune System

Calves at this age have a fully functional immune system but it is naïve. They have not had the exposure to many of the common pathogens found on farms; therefore their immune system has not developed antibodies to these infections. The antibodies from the dam's colostrum is beginning to wear off around 4-6 weeks of age, reducing protection to the calf leaving them immune compromised.

2. Weaning Stress

Weaning is a stressful time for a calf. Their diet is changed, they are moved into a pen with other calves, often being ear tagged and vaccinated at the same time. All of these changes are stressful to this young group of animals.

3. Parasites

Post-weaned calves can be loaded with parasites. Pasture can increase the parasite load, but grass is not always needed for calves to ingest parasites. Some parasites such as Coccidiosis and Nematodirus do not necessarily need grass to thrive and calves can be exposed through group waterers, bedding packs and other environmental contamination.

4. Coccidiosis

Coccidiosis is a one-celled parasite that can be found in the digestive tract of many animals. This parasite does not need grass as part of its life cycle. Coccidia is fecal-oral in its transmission and can be ingested from self-grooming, manure contaminated water, feed or bedding. Dark, loose manure is a good sign you may be dealing with coccidia in your calves.

5. Pneumonia/Respiratory Disease

Respiratory problems in post-weaned calves is one of the dairy industries largest areas of economic loss. Identifying calves early with respiratory disease is extremely important for successful treatment. A heavy parasite load can also weaken the immune system, resulting in respiratory challenges. Providing clean, dry, deeply bedded straw, while ensuring adequate air exchange and pen ventilation are important aspects to consider when looking at preventing respiratory disease.

6. Additional Stresses

Animals at this age can also have additional stress from the heat, cold, poor nutrition, mycotoxins, compromised animal comfort and undesirable air quality.

The best way to manage post-weaned calves is to prevent problems from happening by being proactive. It is more economical for producers to prevent problems from occurring then spending time and money on treatments. Here are some time tested Crystal Creek® recommendations that will help post-weaned calves do their best:

1. Feed 2 oz. of Crystal Pellets™ per head per day for 2 to 3 weeks post-weaning.
2. Mix 3 to 5 lbs. of Heifer Pride™ per ton into the calf feed.
3. At 30 days post-weaning, feed Pivot-FL™ at 1 oz. per 100 lbs. of bodyweight for 2 days.
4. Feed Pivot-FL™ again 3 weeks later for 2 days.

Other tips in managing post-weaned calves:

1. Feed high quality forage.
2. Feed a balanced, well fortified calf grain mix using the Swift Start™ Calf Pellets (containing protein, minerals, trace minerals and vitamins) with your own corn and oats. Additional Swift Start™ Calf & Heifer mineral should be fed free choice as a safety net.
3. If you want to use your own proteins and grain to build a calf and/or heifer grain mix use the Swift Start™ Calf & Heifer mineral with a balanced formula from Crystal Creek®.
4. Make sure the calves have adequate clean, dry bedding (25 lbs straw for every five calves per day).
5. Check air quality in the calf facilities to reduce respiratory problems.
6. Use No-Fly™ to reduce fly stress during the fly season. Also monitor for lice, mange mites, and/or ringworm and treat appropriately. Many producers have had success using No Fly™ to help address lice and mange issues in the winter.
7. Coccidia stressed animals may need a more intensive feeding schedule of Pivot-FL™ (should feed 5 to 7 days) to offer additional support.
8. Clean waterers on a weekly basis.
9. Keep hay off of ground when feeding post-weaned calves.
10. Monitor forage and grain for mold and/or mycotoxins. Do not feed forage or grain with mold or if you suspect mycotoxins.
11. Work with your veterinarian to create a vaccination protocol specific to your farm's needs.

Using these protocols and tips will help make raising calves fun and exciting. You will want to show everyone how good your post-weaned calves look! Please feel free to call a Crystal Creek® livestock specialist to discuss how to implement post-weaned calf management strategies on your farm.