

Ask the Vet/Ask the Nutritionist



“There are times we need to drench our calves or adult cows but no one on the farm is comfortable performing this procedure. Are there any tips that could help us? ”

~ Unsure in Iowa

There are many reasons for having to administer a liquid by mouth into the rumen or abomasum of an animal. Supplying the correct quantity of colostrum to calves or giving an electrolyte solution for rehydration are a couple common examples. Making sure that drenching is being performed correctly on your farm is crucial, as incorrect drenching can cause aspiration of fluids into the lungs leading to pneumonia, choking and even death. Training livestock handlers on the procedure will help set up your operation for success. Drenching requires skill, knowledge, strength, patience and the right tools for the job.

Correct placement of the tube, syringe or dosing gun is vital to carrying out this practice. Always use the proper sized equipment for the animal you are working with. Keep equipment clean and disinfected before use to prevent the spread of disease. Proper animal restraint will make drenching easier for you and the animal. Animals will naturally struggle when being drenched-do NOT rush the administration of liquid(s)! Take time to allow the animal to swallow and minimize as many stressors in the environment as possible. Do not hold the animals head so high that it interferes with their natural swallow reflex.

Organize your equipment and fluids so everything you need is within your reach. Once the animal is restrained, kink the tube to prevent leakage of any fluid during positioning. Open the right side of the

mouth, angle the tip of the tube to the left side of the animal's body as it moves over the back of the tongue, once the animal starts to chew/swallow slowly pass the tube down the esophagus. The tip of the tube can be felt quite easily once it is in the esophagus. Stop IMMEDIATELY if the animal starts coughing or showing any signs that the tube has entered the trachea. If proper positioning has been obtained, you will be able to feel the rigid, enlarged esophagus, alongside/as well as the rings of the trachea and you should be able to smell an odor of rumen gas coming from the tube. Once correct positioning is verified, unkink the tube and begin delivery of the fluids. Keep the animal as still and calm as possible. When drenching is complete, kink the tube again and slowly remove it.

Ask your veterinarian to show you how to pass a stomach tube or esophageal feeder when they are visiting your farm. This hands on experience with the help of an expert is invaluable. Keep visual drawings and clear, concise directions on what your drenching protocol is so your employees are well prepared in the event of an emergency.

Drenching livestock is an important skill for animal handlers to have as it can literally save a life. Ensuring it is done properly will keep your livestock safe and healthier from the benefits it can provide.

- Lorrie Meister, CVT,
Livestock Specialist

Please submit your animal health or nutrition questions in writing to:

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