



Ask the Vet

Protocols for Weaning Beef Calves ~ By Darren Zimmerman, D.V.M.



Weaning calves takes planning. There is a lot to consider. Every farm is different with their facilities, management, type of cattle, diseases, and climate. As a veterinarian and beef producer, I understand some of the challenges beef raisers face. Below is a summary of how I wean my beef calves. It is not the only way to do things, but it is what works for our operation.

When to Wean

Knowing when to wean your calves has more to do with their weight than the calendar. Over 10% of beef heifers will enter puberty before they reach half of their mature bodyweight. This means it is important to separate the bulls and heifers in a timely manner to prevent any early breeding. In some cases, weaning calves at 500-600 pounds could be too late to remove the heifers from the herd bull or bull calves.

Dr. Darren Tip: Weaning calves goes better with extra help. Invite friends or family over to help with the process. Making it fun and providing food makes sure they come back every year!

Processing Protocols

Vaccines: Work with your veterinarian to develop a vaccine protocol that is customized to your farm. The vaccines I use on my cattle are:

Intranasal - IBR, PI3, BRSV with or without Pasteurella and Mannheimia

MLV 5-way - IBR, PI3, BRSV, BVD types 1 and 2

Bacteria pneumonia - Pasteurella and Mannheimia

Clostridial 8-way - Black leg, Enterotoxemia, Red Water and others

Other Vaccines used sometimes:

Reproductive - Leptospirosis, Brucellosis -only on females and depending on source of animals.

Tetanus - used when banding a bull or set of horns.

Pink eye - depending on time of year and stress load.

Processing

Dr. Darren Tip: Get all of your processing products and equipment together ahead of time and set up a table by the chute to lay them out on. Hooks and other ways to hang things can help with efficiency and cleanliness. It will make things go smoothly and reduce the time the animals spend in the chute or holding pen. A list of what needs to be done for each animal will help ensure a task is not forgotten. Put one person in charge of the list, and in charge.

Now is the time for castration, dehorning, implants (optional), branding and anything else that is needed. A check list for each animal can help keep everyone going without missing anything.

Double check that you have identified them as they go through the chute.

Internal and external parasites can be addressed at this time too. I have used many products over the years. Crystal Creek® has several products to offer in this area. Ask a Crystal Creek® representative for more information.

How to prepare them, what to feed them, and where to put them, all play a role in their level of stress.

We offer the calves the same feed before and after weaning. The less change they see through this process the better. The last 4 weeks before weaning they get the same hay and grain mix. This feed is balanced. It contains all the vitamins and minerals at the right levels to support the calf through these changes. Crystal Creek® offers ROI® Beef Mineral, a specific-to-beef vitamin and mineral pack, or ROI® Beef Pellet, a pelleted protein, vitamin, and mineral mix. I have used both in different situations to take care of my animals. It is also at this time



that I add either Crystal Pellets™ or Crystal Meal™ to their grain mix. These products are aloe based and help boost the immune system. Crystal Creek® also has a liquid aloe that could be added to water for the same effect. For more information on both chelated minerals and the benefits of aloe, please see Dr. Darren Zimmerman's article *Mineral Nutrition: Advancements Over Time* and Dr. Ryan Leiterman's article *The Science behind Aloe's Use in Livestock*, both in the April 2023 newsletter.

Breaking up the processing into two times, a month apart, can reduce stress and provide time for the immune system to respond to the vaccines. After the first round we put them back with their mothers. After the second round we move them to their new home. Nose inserts for weaning or fence line weaning are two things we don't do but might help you depending on your management style.

Once the calves are weaned and removed from their mothers, our work is not done. When I bring the group to their new home, I am sure to introduce them to all the amenities. I bring feed to them at this time and this lets them see where the feeders are. The feed is not different than before, but the bunks and location might be. The same goes for water. I will drain the water and let the waterer refill so they can hear it. The water traveling away from the waterer will often draw attention. I usually have fresh bedding ready to go as they come out of the chute after their last time through. It is easy to look for problems in fresh bedding.

The next two weeks are often the worst for problems. Shipping fever or pneumonia at about a week can be a problem. Knowing if the problem is a virus or bacteria will affect your treatment options. Also watch for diarrhea. Any animal not watching you as you go through the pen is a suspect for problems.

Weaning is a stressful event for cattle. The more we can do to help them the better. A good vaccination and parasite program tailored to your farm's needs goes a long way. Vaccine programs and dewormers work best when calves are on a high plain of nutrition. Time waiting and time in the chute add to the stress. Staying organized and having extra help can minimize this. Don't forget to have fun.



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

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