

Calf care: best practices for a better performance

Paying attention to the first hours of life of its calves is a key factor of success for a good growth. Preparation, monitoring and hygiene are the basis. In the case of bad events, the farmer can rely on specific tools to support its calves.

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Hazard and risks in a farm

Performances vary from one farm to another. Difference could be significant. To improve performance and profitability of your farm, it's important to identify the main reasons for bad performances (disease, bad growth, death). Four fields can be identified: cow, environment, feed program, and farmer.

Cow selection:

Several parameters influence the quality of the calf that come from the cow. Genetic impacts on performance and hardiness. General body condition of the cow has an effect on the fetal development, the calving, and the weight and body condition of the calf at birth. After birth the quality of udders influences quality and quantity of colostrum and milk production. The choice of the convenient genetic and a feed plan designed for each period (dry period, beginning of milking period, milking period) will help to improve performances of the calf.



Environment:

Climate can be a factor of stress. An inadequate temperature is a stress factor. Draft and humidity make things worse, causing discomfort. Both hygiene and biosecurity help to maintain pathogens far from animals. That's why the lack of hygiene and non-compliance with biosecurity increase the risk of diseases.

An adequate building and respect of the rules of hygiene and biosecurity are key factors of success to maintain a good general health condition.

When risk of disease is too high, vaccination is a great tool.

Feed program:

We should keep in mind that water is the first feed. It should be clean and, as far as possible, fresh without color and odor. An attention should be paid to the water system which could be a source of pollution and disrupt water supply (inadequate pressure...).

Feed program is a useful tool to optimize calf growth. Quality, quantity and feeding routine are important. Make sure that milk provider is put at calf's breast height for a good digestion.

Farmer:

Organization skills, ability to observe, to have empathy or composure are highly valued in a farm. Organization skills will help to save time, so the farmer will have more time for observation. A good sense of observation, combined with empathy, improves the ability to detect specific events (discomfort, disease or sow heats). Composure is important to keep the

farm on track. When bad events are happening with a great frequency, it's important to keep good practices and check the situation properly before acting.

Critical periods

Some specific periods need special attention because risks are higher than usual. If so, it's important to spend more time than usual to secure these periods. Birth is particularly critical.

A stressful event

Birth is quite traumatic. Calf is arriving in a new environment and needs to adapt to it. Breathing, moving, feeding, and fighting against pathogens: everything is new.

The worst the conditions are at birth, the lower are its chances of survival. Conversely, it is possible to change some parameters to improve the chance of survival.

Preparation:

It should start a month before calving. It is recommended giving a specific feed to the cow. It will help to mobilize calcium at birth, prepare the rumen to high activity thanks to a high level of energy.

Vaccination can be done 3 to 5 weeks before calving to obtain the best quality of colostrum.

At birth:

Priority is to check calf respiration. If it's not breathing, clear the fluid away from his nose with fingers and tickle the inside of one nostril with a clean piece of hay or straw. If it doesn't start breathing, calf can be held up by their hind legs.

The second key point is the body's temperature. Newborn calf is very sensitive to cold. Let the cow lick its calf. You can stimulate the licking by

adding some salt on the calf's back. If not, dry the calf with straw or hay. Have a look to the navel to make sure that it is not bleeding. Disinfect it with iodine solution or a disinfectant like chlorhexidine.

Then, the calf should drink a large amount of colostrum. It must drink 4 to 5 liters within the first 24 hours of life. Colostrum is needed to bring energy and immunity to the calf. A lack of colostrum increases the risk of exhaustion or sensibility to disease during the first weeks of life. Sometimes, the farmer needs to stimulate colostrum intake: it is too weak (low weight, long parturition) or quality of colostrum is not enough and calf needs to drink more (young cow, twin). In that case, energy booster such as **Boosty'Vo®** will be of help, providing energy and stimulants to the newborn calf.



Breeding calves is an art more than a science. Hazards are numerous and good practices help to decrease risks. If time is a concern, focus on critical periods. The time and efforts you dedicate is an excellent investment for future.