

Feeding guide

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Research

Key Points

1. Planning before the rearing season starts makes things easier.
2. Attention to detail is important.
3. Decide how and what you are going to feed your calves.
4. Create a routine and stick to it.
5. Ensure all calves have adequate colostrum in the first 24 hours.
6. Have a plan in place for when things go wrong.



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Calf Rearing Fact Sheet 1.7

General

- As calves are baby animals they initially need to be fed milk until their rumen develops sufficiently for them to obtain adequate energy from grass to maintain good growth rates. How fast the rumen develops depends on the feeding system used.
- You need to choose a system that suits you and follow it carefully (see Fact Sheets 3.1 - 3.5).
- You need to know how much milk each calf is getting as both underfeeding and overfeeding calves can affect calf health and growth rates.
- Underfeeding a calf can reduce their future performance in terms of growth rate and lactation. Overfeeding is expensive, can cause scours and actually delays rumen development.
- Set up a routine so the calves are fed at the same time each day.
- Have a plan for what to do if something goes wrong.

Planning

- Before calf rearing starts, decide what equipment you are going to use, how much milk you are going to feed and how you will provide it.
- Make sure you have everything ready before the first calves arrive in the shed.
- On entry to the shed the calves should be fed colostrum as this is critical to producing healthy calves.
- Calves need to be trained to drink off a calf feeder. This can take time and patience and some calves take longer than others.
- Initially calves should be fed twice a day. The length of time calves are fed twice a day depends on the feeding system used and the size and health of the calf. Twice a day feeding enables you to check each calf twice a day.
- Make sure all calves come up and drink their milk ration at every feed.
- Make sure every calf has room to get on the feeder.
- Feed at the same time each day.
- Monitor what is happening – is every calf drinking well, are they alert, full of energy etc? Identify any calves that are not – and act to sort out their problems.
- Calves are fussy eaters especially when they are young so it is important to ensure that everything you feed—milk, calf pellets / meal, hay and grass is fresh, clean and appealing. Milk and pellets must be high quality.
- It is important that the milk feeders are kept clean and teats are replaced as they become worn.
- Calves need water as well as milk—particularly if they are eating meal.
- Keep water troughs clean as calves won't drink dirty water. If you wouldn't drink it, don't expect them to!