
Animal Science

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WEANING BEEF CALVES

Warren Gill and Clyde D. Lane, Jr.
Professors
Animal Science

Too often in Tennessee, calves are weaned by taking them to the auction market. This is stressful for the calves and detrimental to the reputation of the state's beef industry. Properly weaned calves are better able to withstand the stress of marketing and are more desirable to buyers.

Good Weaning Management Starts before Weaning. A good vaccination program is beneficial. For optimum results, the vaccination and booster be finished at least three weeks prior to weaning for optimum benefit. It is less desirable, but acceptable, to vaccinate at weaning. Most calves should be vaccinated for "blackleg" (clostridial-combinations) as well as shipping fever (IBR, BVD, PI3, BRSV and possibly Hemophilus and pasteurilla). Discuss the best vaccines for your operation with your veterinarian.

Calves should be dewormed at least once prior to weaning and again at weaning time.

One way to minimize stress at weaning is to creep-feed calves for a short period prior to weaning. Attempt to limit the creep-feeding level to about 0.5 to 1.0 percent of body weight, if possible. Creep grazing is another option that has been reported to ease the stress of weaning.

Growth-promoting implants are another method for improving calf performance prior to and following weaning. Calves will often receive at least one implant early in life and another prior to or at weaning.

Facilities for Weaning. To reduce stress at weaning, construct working corrals, chutes, alleys and sick pens that permit easy sorting and handling. Quiet, efficient handling not only reduces the time required, but also reduces stress. Locate sick pens close to the weaning pens, and include a small shed to provide a dry, draft-free place for sick cattle.

Design weaning pens to encourage intake of both feed and water. This will minimize nutritional stress and ease checking and sorting sick cattle. These pens should be well-drained and dry, but not dusty. Small pastures can be used for weaning, but sorting sick cattle is difficult and creates stress for both the sick and healthy cattle. Weaning pens need ample bunk space and large-capacity waterers that are easily accessible. Running water helps attract calves to a water supply that is new to them. Placing feed bunks perpendicularly to the fence line may allow calves to “find” feed more quickly.

Feeding the Newly Weaned Calf. Provide fresh, palatable feed to shorten the time that the calves are in a negative energy balance. Have high-quality, long hay available when the calves go to the weaning pen. If calves have been off feed and water for some extended period, feeding hay but withholding water for the first two to four hours in the weaning pen may result in greater feed consumption and less nutritional stress.

Commercially prepared supplements are available and may be preferable in many operations.

Soybean hull pellets are an example of a palatable feed, high in protein and digestible fiber that is often incorporated into feed mixtures. Others include cottonseed meal, corn gluten feed and soybean meal. Urea should not be included in the supplement for some time after weaning. If long hay is fed in the feed bunks, the supplement can be fed on top of the loose hay.

Research indicates that calves should be kept in a weaning program for at least 45 days.

The desired gain during the early post-weaning period may depend on how long the calves will remain on the farm. If you plan to market calves 45 to 60 days following weaning, substantial gains may be one of your goals. If so, grains or commercial starter feeds can be added beginning the third or fourth day after weaning (or immediately, if calves have been creep fed prior to weaning). Attempt to achieve consumption of about 1.0 percent of body weight within ten to fourteen days.

If calves are to be maintained for a longer “backgrounding” program, lower initial gains may be acceptable. In that case, feed less concentrate (0.5 percent of body weight would be typical).

Avoid allowing calves to become too “fleshy” in any program, because over-conditioned calves will often be discounted.

Feed additives appear to increase early post-weaning gain and may be helpful also in reducing disease problems, including coccidia (where it is a problem). Discuss this with your feed dealer.

Handling Sick Cattle. Early detection and treatment of sick calves is a key to having a low death loss and a minimum of chronic unhealthy calves. Calves in the early stages of incubation of an illness have a far better chance to respond favorably to proper treatment. Check calves closely for early symptoms of illness three to six times daily for the first two to three weeks. Pen checking requires patience, concern, close observation and an

awareness of the unusual. Animals that do not compete at the feed bunk or which stand off by themselves are candidates for individual attention.

Check the body temperature at any sign of sickness. Any animal with a temperature of 104/F or higher needs immediate treatment. Cattle with slightly lower temperatures may need treatment, but may also benefit from a stay in the recovery pen where there is close proximity to feed and water and less competition from other cattle.

Develop a sick-calf therapy program with a veterinarian. Bovine respiratory disease complex is the most common disease problem in newly weaned calves. The treatment program for this complex disease should continue for at least three or four days and can be longer.

Keep a record of health problems and treatment for each animal taken to the sick pen. A numbered hospital tag in the ear of each treated animal allows you to follow its health history.

Additional information on managing beef cattle can be obtained by contacting your local Agricultural Extension Service Office or from the Animal Science Home Page: www.utextension.utk.

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Charles L. Norman, Dean