



# Mitchell Veterinary Services

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## CROSS-SUCKING BEHAVIOUR IN GROUP HOUSED DAIRY CALVES

As the adoption of automatic milk feeding systems for calves becomes more common, the concern about cross-sucking behavior between calves is increasing. Controlling cross-sucking is important as it can lead to mastitis in heifers and blind quarters at calving. Before weaning in group-housed calves, much of the cross-sucking is concentrated in the 15 minutes before and after drinking. However, about a third of the time the behavior may be unrelated to milk consumption. After weaning in group-housed calves, there are large differences among calves in the duration of cross-sucking, and this often occurs between pairs of calves.

Cross-sucking is considered abnormal behavior. It is not observed in calf-dam pairs. When the calf is able to nurse its own dam, there is no urge to suck on another calf. In group-housed calves extra sucking of some kind is common and declines quickly after milk feeding. There is a large difference in the desire to suck between calves. Individual pens prevent cross-sucking behavior. In group housed calves, having a teat/nipple to suck reduces the amount of cross-sucking observed. Higher rates of cross-sucking are seen when milk feeding is restricted to less than 8 litres per day. Calves allowed to consume as much milk as they want per

feeding (i.e. ad lib acidified milk) or at least 2 to 2.5 litres per feeding, become full and then usually want to lie down and rest after feeding. They are less likely to spend time sucking another calf.

Watching calves for repeated cross-sucking behavior will identify the problem calves. There is not a lot of research, but it is thought that 20% of calves are responsible for 80% of the cross-sucking behavior. After weaning, calves that have developed this behavior may increase the amount of cross-sucking they do. A weaner nose ring can be put into those calves, or they can be removed from the group.

In summary, cross-sucking will occur in group fed calves, but can be reduced by allowing calves to drink larger volumes of milk per feeding (at least 2 to 2.5L), and allowing more frequent visits so they can drink whenever they are hungry. Calves that are full and content will exhibit less cross-sucking behavior. It is known that feeding higher amounts of milk allows calves to grow faster, have less sickness, calve in 2 months of age younger on average, and produce an average of 800kg more milk in lactation 1. It now also appears it will benefit by having less heifers with blind quarters and mastitis.