



Mitchell Veterinary Services

Pauly Veterinary Clinic

243 Ontario Road
P.O. Box 1224
Mitchell, Ontario N0K 1N0
Phone (519) 348-9711
Fax (519) 348-4432

62 Main St. S.
P.O. Box 359
Milverton, Ontario N0K 1M0
Phone (519) 595-8888
Fax (519) 595-8758

How are the calves doing?

Dairy Newsletter

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Recently there has been a lot more attention given to calf health and growth at producer meetings and in magazine articles. Colostrum feeding practices have come under close scrutiny. Why is this? There is an opportunity to improve calf health and survivability that increases farm profitability.

The following measures can be used to monitor your calf raising program.

1. Preweaning Death Rate - target 2% or less
2. Preweaning Treatment Rate – target 10% or less.
3. Weaning Weight - Double birth weight at 56 days of age – target is 95% of calves
4. Colostrum Quality – Bacteria counts less than 10,000 CFU/ml
 - Brix reading greater than 22%
5. Calf Total Protein – Calves tested day 2 to 5 of age
 - 80% above 5.5g/dl on refractometer or 8.4% on Brix
6. Calf Pneumonia - First 60 days of life – less than 10% treated & less than 3% death
 - 2 to 4 months of life – less than 10% treated & less than 2% death
 - 4 to 6 months of life – less than 2% treated & less than 1% death

Feeding 4 litres of clean colostrum as soon as possible after birth will maximize the antibody absorption and allow you to achieve the highest total serum protein in the calf. The longer you wait to milk the cow past 2 hours after calving, the antibody level of the colostrum drops. Therefore, your 4 litres fed to the calf contains less antibodies to be absorbed. Fresh colostrum is also high in white blood cells that are useful to fight infection and also will prime the calf's own immune system against disease. When the fresh cow is milked, feed the colostrum right away because the longer it sits in the pail, the higher the bacteria level becomes. High bacteria levels will cause the calves to become sick.

Colostrum feeding is the first step to good calf health preventative care. Nutrition, housing and bedding, ventilation and vaccination are also important in raising healthy calves. How are the calves doing?

Rick

