

Keep Them Rolling

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For the last few years, the dairy industry has paid plenty of attention to the newborn calf and doubling birth weight by weaning. Many herds have improved their colostrum management and preweaning nutrition and herd records. All over the province are showing impressive reductions in calf mortality and morbidity. The next step is to build on this success and keep our calves rolling well.

The post weaned calf commonly has many stressful encounters: new pen, new ration, many more pen mates, etc. It is important to not 'stack' stressors on these post weaned calves. Stresses we commonly forget to discuss are adequate: (1) feedbunk space; (2) fresh water sources; (3) high quality bedded pack space; and (4) size difference of calves in a pen.

Feedbunk Space

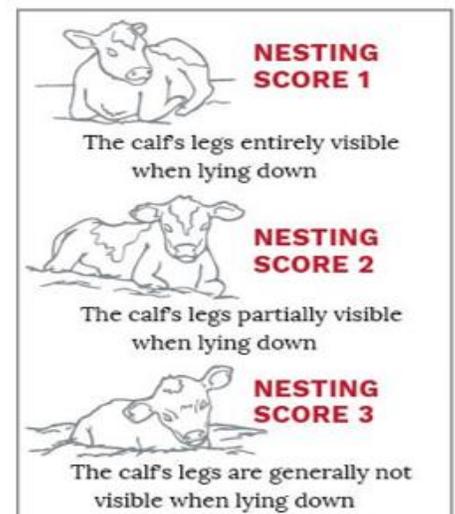
Eating space for the 2 to 4 month calf, as recommended by Penn State, is 18 inches per head. This number is higher than older calves but is very important to ensure the younger, smaller, more timid calf still has easy access to the feedbunk.

Water Sources

Ideally each pen has two water sources.

Resting Space

The resting area for calves under six month old is almost always a bedded pack. Very little research has been done on adequate bedded pack space, that being said, the common recommendation is to provide 40 square feet at two months old and increase to 48 square feet by six months old. The comfort of the pack is probably just as important as the size of the pack. The calves need plenty of bedding to stay dry and to be able to nestle into the straw to stay warm during the cooler seasons of the year. Ideally calves score three during the cold weather and score two on the nesting scale for the rest of the year. A calf coat is equal to one nesting score.



Size Difference

For the postweaned calf, **size matters. Too much weight difference between the largest and smallest calf is a major stressor.** If we convert age differences as recommended by Penn State (assuming 2 pound/day gain) we need to have less than 50 pounds difference for the 2 to 4 month calf, and up to 120 (I prefer 100) pounds difference for 4 to 6 month old calves. This can be difficult to accomplish with swings in heifer calves per month and in smaller herds, but we need to try to help the younger /smaller calf in these pens. The more we put too many undersized calves in an overstocked pen we will encourage poorer growth rates and an increase in calf treatment rates.

The ration we provide to the 2 to 4 month calf can help alleviate some of the issues we see with weight spread in calf pens. Many dairy herds in Ontario are feeding the dry TMR to their post weaned calves. This mixture is usually 85% calf starter and 15% finely chopped straw. If we have this free choice to the postweaned calf, it helps the smaller, submissive calf as long as the feedbunk is always full and there is very limited sorting. The smaller calf should be able to go up and eat a few hours after new feed is delivered and still have plenty of good nutritious dry TMR to consume. This dry TMR should not replace trying to eliminate the stressors of adequate feed space and proper weight difference in a pen. If you wish to try this dry TMR please talk to your advisor to ensure it is formulated to get the best results possible on your farm.

How soon to start feeding wet forages to young calves is a common discussion point on many dairy herds. By six months old, all calves should be able to handle their forages in a wet form. From four to six months old, we can feed a very limited amount of haylage/balage. Calves under six months old will happily eat haylage/corn silage/balage/barlage etc.; however, research and on farm experience has shown us that their total dry matter intake is less if we feed wet forage versus dry forages before six month old. Delaying the 2 to 4 week transition period from dry forages to wet forages until the calf is 5.5 month old or older will minimize the stress of the forage change. Please check your forage feeding practices of your 4 month and older calves with your advisor to ensure we reduce this stress and optimize our results.

If we can minimize the housing, weight difference, and nutritional stresses we can easily keep these calves rolling along very well with good growth rates and very low treatment rates.

Happy heifer raising!