

Managing Calf Scours

Dr. Jessica Gordon

As calving season gets underway, one of the areas of animal health we have to be concerned about is calf scours. There are many different viruses, bacteria, and parasites that can cause calf scours. Most of these are normally found in the GI tract of healthy mature cattle and are spread in feces. The fact that these bugs are found on almost every farm may make you wonder what can be done about calf scours.

A bug being found on a farm does not necessarily mean it will cause disease. There are many aspects that go into the risk of an individual animal getting sick. Nutrition, overall health, weather, and environment are some of them. For a young calf, nutrition is milk based, so supporting the cow is critical. Ensuring the cows are on a good plane of nutrition and are not plagued by other diseases, such as respiratory disease, will help ensure cows have sufficient body stores to produce enough high quality milk for their calves. Also, making sure the environment is clean and dry will keep the cows cleaner and thus decrease the risk of the calf taking a manure meal when suckling from the cow.

Making sure the cows have enough vitamins, minerals, protein, and energy is especially important around the time of calving. Colostrum, or a calf's first meal, is being produced in weeks leading up to calving. It is critical that the colostrum the calf receives is high quality with lots of immunoglobulins in it. Feeding the cows appropriately will help ensure that the colostrum she produces is high quality. Additionally, things like calf scours vaccines can boost the content of immunoglobulins specific to organisms that cause calf scours. Calf scours vaccines should not be considered a silver bullet. If management is not in tip-top shape, vaccination will not stop a scours outbreak. But it can help decrease the risk of calves getting ill. Speak with your veterinarian to determine if scours vaccination is right for you, particularly if you calve indoors.

Regardless of the bug that is causing calf scours in your herd, making sure everything is clean will help decrease the risk of disease. Make sure calves have a clean, dry place to lay down and cows are calving in clean, dry calving pens if indoors. Dampness and manure matting on the coat make dealing with the weather challenging. Cattle can survive and thrive in quite cold conditions, but if their coats are wet, they require a lot more energy just to maintain their body. This leaves less energy available to fight off disease and increases the risk of animals getting sick.

Cleanliness may be particularly challenging if cows are calving in the same area that they are housed during the winter. There can be a large accumulation of bugs in the environment from the cows over time. Making sure the barn is well bedded on a regular basis and cleaning it out as needed will do a lot to help decrease the risk of disease. If you're unsure if you are providing sufficient bedding, do the knee test. Kneel down in the bedded pack. Do your knees get wet? If they do, it's time to use more bedding or bed more frequently. If you calve in a barn and are experiencing a scours outbreak, getting the animals outside may be beneficial to decrease the risk of new cases. This is assuming you

have somewhere relatively clean and dry to house them. Or get the older calves out, clean out the barn if possible, and bed well for the new calves being born.

What may surprise you is that the biggest risk of infection in young calves comes from other calves rather than the cows. Calves are germ factories. When they get ill, the number of viruses or bacteria that they are shedding is much higher than any individual cow and may be higher than all the cows combined! It is ideal to have groups of cows that have calved within one week managed together and a new group started each week. However, this is not possible or practical on many operations in Ontario. Having an area where sick calves can be housed separately and keeping those calves separated until all calves in the herd are over a month of age will help decrease the risk of spread of disease from sick calves to younger calves in the herd.

When it comes to risk of disease, calves of heifers are particularly vulnerable. The colostrum that is made by heifers often is not as high quality as that made by cows. The calves also tend to be a bit smaller and not quite as hearty. Having your heifers calve first, about 2-4 weeks before the cows, can help ensure that these calves are born in a cleaner environment. It generally also means you will have more time and energy to devote to these calves to get them started out right.

When it comes to calf scours prevention, cleanliness is the key. Keeping the animals as clean and dry as possible is a challenging, especially with many freezes and thaws. But decreasing the number of sick calves in the herd and the labor that goes with it will make it all worth it. Stay warm and dry out there!