

Calf scours remains one of the most common diseases we see on dairy farms in the spring. The most common cause is Rotavirus. Cryptosporidia, Coronavirus and E. coli are among the other common causes.



Rotavirus is on all properties, the virus is shed in the faeces of apparently healthy animals especially at time of high stress such as at calving. This makes newborn calves especially at risk. Calf scour outbreaks often occur at the same time as calving peaks. This can make life very difficult when workloads are already high. Seeing valuable calves suffering and dying is also very distressing for all concerned. Treatment is time consuming, expensive, stressful, and not often successful. Antibiotics are ineffective. Even when animals do survive, they will shed vast amounts of virus and act to contaminate the environment, spreading the infection to healthy calves. At greatest risk are the new born calves that come into contaminated pens during an outbreak. They usually lack the reserves to fight off infections at such a young age, and death rates in this group can be high.

So what are the options for preventing calf scours? The most common method that is employed is the use of a vaccine in pregnant cows between 3 and 12 weeks prior to calving. This produces high levels of antibody in the cow's colostrum to rotavirus. The formulation for this product has been changed to include Coronavirus, offering added protection. One minor drawback of the vaccine is the lumps that often form at the site of injection. The new formulation is less likely to cause this problem.

If you are considering using the vaccine it is important that you realise that the vaccine is only a part of the solution and that management still plays a major role in the control of calf scours. Good colostrum feeding is vital. Calves must get 2 - 2.5 litres of immediate post-calving colostrum within 6-12 hours of birth while colostrum antibodies are at their highest. They then need 2.5 - 3 litres of stored or fresh colostrum daily during the first 2 - 3 weeks - longer if possible - to provide the crucial localised protection at gut level. If you sell colostrum or use milk powder to rear your calves then the vaccine is probably not going to help with scours on your farm.

Another option to help combat calf scours is the use of an antibody rich powder that can be mixed with water or milk and drenched to calves. Made in Japan from egg yolks, this product is primarily aimed at rotavirus infections, but has the advantage that other antibodies can be added depending on the cause of infection, for example Cryptosporidia or Salmonella. This product can be used as a preventative treatment to reduce the chance of an infection establishing in rearing sheds or as an aid in the treatment of animals during an outbreak. This product is particularly suited to farms where people buy calves in from different sources, one of the highest risk factors for

introducing scour infections into calf sheds. It can also be used as part of a strategy to help protect newborn calves entering calf sheds that have had scours in them earlier on in the season.

Talk to your vet about which product and calf rearing programme is best for your farm.