

MANAGING CALF SCOURS

Any suspect calves that are depressed, have swollen navel, swollen joints, diarrhoea or just off their feed should be isolated immediately and treated a.s.a.p. A wait and see approach is usually more costly when dealing with calves.

Diarrhoea, or scouring, is the most common disease of young calves. Scouring is caused by local irritation of the intestinal lining by infectious or chemical agents

1. Incorrect nutritional management.
2. Bacterial infections.
3. Viral infections.
4. Internal parasites.

The infections are often a secondary result to poor nutritional or housing management.

SIGNS OF SCOURING

- Calf off food, or "hangs back" from feeding.
- Calf huddled up and unhappy – isolates itself and won't interact.
- Wet tail, hocks & thighs: White, brown or black watery dung (may be flecked with blood).
- Hair stands on end.
- Mouth feels cold.
- Skin that feels "leathery" and "tents" when pinched, ie. dehydration.
- Rectal temperature may be high (above 39.5°) or low (less than 38°).
- Calf sits or lies out flat and is unable to stand.

TREATING SCOURS

A scouring calf urgently requires water and electrolytes to correct imbalances, and must also receive a source of energy. Most scouring calves can be saved with just electrolytes, whether the cause is dietary, bacterial or viral, without the need for antibiotics.

Example: A 45kg calf that is 10% dehydrated requires 4.5L of electrolytes just to restore the lost body fluid. It then needs another 4-5L of fluids to meet its daily maintenance requirements. That's a total requirement of 9-10L per day.

How do you decide how dehydrated a calf is? Here are some pointers to help:

- Mild scour < 5% dehydrated. The calf will be mildly depressed, urine output will decrease but it will still remain relatively alert and look to feed.
- Moderate 6-8% dehydrated. Eyes become sunken, skin is tight, calf is depressed but still standing, and mouth & nose are dry. It is less enthusiastic to feed.
- Severe 10% dehydrated. All above signs more pronounced, legs & ears cold to touch and calf remains down.
- Skin tightness is a sign of dehydration. In a normal animal, if you pinch a fold of skin firmly and release, it will rapidly spring back to normal. In a dehydrated animal the skin will remain 'tented' for several seconds. The longer it remains 'tented', the more severe the dehydration.

When you give electrolytes (salts etc) the calf becomes thirsty. If you have given 6 litres of electrolytes it will go looking for another 4L of water to make up the rest of its daily requirement. If fresh clean water isn't available in every pen, the calf will go looking for water-this may be from a puddle, drains or even each others urine. Do not overlook the importance of ad-lib clean water.

Research has shown that diarrhoeic calves should continue to receive at least some, if not all, of their normal milk product, as scouring calves given their normal milk ration **plus** oral electrolytes developed firmer faeces, had higher body weight gains, recovered faster and had higher blood glucose concentrations than calves on oral electrolytes only.

Debate still exists as to the effect of electrolytes on milk clotting in the stomach of calves. Therefore we advise feeding alternatively at 2-3 hour intervals.