

CALF MANAGEMENT FOR BEST BEHAVIOR, HEALTH & GROWTH

Dr. Trevor DeVries, University of Guelph

The way dairy calves are fed and managed can have lasting effects on their lifelong eating habits and related growth, health and productivity. Dr. Trevor DeVries, University of Guelph Animal Behavior and Welfare Researcher, has studied and researched calf feeding behavior in great depth, and recently shared his findings during the Semex Webinar Series.

PROVIDE ADEQUATE MILK

- Providing greater quantities of milk, ideally 8 liters per day, results in calves that experience less stress; higher immune function; improved efficiency of feed conversion; earlier age at first breeding; and improved milk production.
- Continuous access to milk leads to slower rate of milk consumption and smaller meals. Teaching calves this pattern at a young age can lead to improvement in eating patterns as they age.

WEAN GRADUALLY

- Weaning should take place gradually over a two-week period to help the calf transition to solid feed consumption. Abrupt weaning is not recommended and weaning prior to 8 weeks of age is not recommended.

FEED STARTER AND FORAGE STRATEGICALLY

- Young calves need both starter grain concentrate and forage. High quality starter concentrate at 20-22% protein contributes to production of volatile fatty acids important for promoting rumen papillae growth.
- Forage promotes rumen wall muscle development and volume. Feeding forage early in life may promote greater solid feed consumption before and after weaning. He advised that providing

hay as coarse, physically effective fiber chopped fine (s3-4 cm length) improved gain-to-feed ration; feed intake post-weaning; and totally tract nutrient digestibility post-weaning compared to a finer fiber source (2 mm length).

- Feeding dry feeds as a TMR both before and after weaning, should help promote consistent, greater nutrient and intake.

DON'T LIMIT WATER FOR MILK-FED CALVES

- Calves should always have access to water.

GROUP HOUSE CALVES

- Group house calves whenever possible, pair-housed calves develop better eating patterns and respond to stress better than individually housed animals.

For more information, watch the webinar recording here:

