



Boostering Cows to Boost Colostrum

Making sure calves get enough good quality colostrum as soon as possible after birth is one of the most vital steps to ensure that calves have the best start in life. Colostrum is the first building block in developing a strong immune system to fight off infectious disease challenges they may face within the first few months of life. Timing is critical as not only does the calf absorb colostrum better earlier but the quality produced by the cow declines by the minute. Reducing time to suckling or first milking is critical.



Getting the right quantity of colostrum into a calf is fairly straight forward but how do we ensure good quality colostrum? The first consideration is the nutritional status of the dam. A dam receiving inadequate nutrition with poor body condition will produce poor colostrum. Get nutrition right first!

All calves require 10% of their body weight of colostrum in the first 6 hours of life.

It is known that older cows generally have better colostrum than heifers. Why is this? Colostrum is full of antibodies against certain diseases. Antibodies are proteins produced by the immune system when exposed to a disease challenge. Older cows have more life experience, so more disease exposure, thus a broader range of antibodies. Antibodies for diseases stay in the bloodstream for varying amounts of time and mean that if the animal encounters that disease again, the antibodies are there to fight the infection before the animal becomes sick. When calves are born, they have had very limited exposure to disease (hopefully), so hit the ground with no antibodies. Colostrum provides calves with their first antibodies so they have some protection while they develop their own immune system.

The range of antibodies in the colostrum depends on the dam's exposure to different diseases. Nobody can guarantee all breeding females have been exposed to all disease challenges the calf might face in the first few weeks of birth. Nearly 50% of neonatal calf deaths in the UK are caused by scour. The three most common bugs causing scour kill the calves through severe dehydration and malabsorption of nutrients. These bugs are E.coli, rota virus and corona virus. Most cattle have been exposed to some, if not all of these bugs at some point in their lives, but this is not always the case. For example, if breeding females have been bought in from a farm naïve to certain diseases or brought a disease with them that your farm is naïve to, the disease challenge can change. Antibodies to these scour causing bugs will also dissipate over time if the dam does not gain regular exposure to 'remind' the body to produce them.



Did you know that a calf needs to latch on to a teat properly for 20 minutes to get an adequate feed?



Fortunately, there is a vaccine on the market called Bovigen. One shot of the vaccine is given to the breeding females 12 – 3 weeks prior to calving to boost antibodies in their colostrum against E. coli, rota virus and corona virus.

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