

Newborn care

The first few hours of a calf's life is critical to long term health and production. Newborns are fragile and susceptible and need to be looked after as such. Of critical importance are the following:

Colostrum

Navel Care

Warmth

Hygiene

Colostrum – 10% bodyweight (4litres for a 40kg calf) of quality colostrum in the first 6 hours, within the first hour is best. See 'First Colostrum' for more information.

Navel Care – the navel (or umbilicus) offers the perfect access point for pathogens to enter the calf's blood system and wreak havoc. Until the navel area has closed over and dried up treat this area as a protected zone – no soiling, no bruising, no cross-suckling. This means keep transport trailers clean, keep bedding clean, and when handling calves be sure to not accidentally bump the navel area. For example, if you are lifting a calf never rest a calf over a gate this can cause bruising to the area which creates an even friendlier environment for bacteria. Spray the navel thoroughly with antibacterial spray as soon as possible and keep spraying as needed. Gently palpate the navel to check for swelling if you are suspicious, the cord should be no thicker than your thumb, if thicker this may indicate an infection which may need antibiotic treatment. If the calf show pain when you touch the navel this is another indication that an infection may be present. Sequelae of navel infections include liver abscesses (these can cause many problems down the track), joint infections, eye infections (cloudy eyes), general ill-thrift and other infections anywhere around the body. Talk to your vet if you have any concerns. The earlier the treatment the more likely a positive outcome.

Warmth – calves are very susceptible to cold stress due to a low surface area to body weight ratio and a very low body fat percentage (3% vs 16% for humans). Ideally ambient temperatures stay over 10 degrees celcius. Adequate shelter with dry bedding, draft prevention and facing the sun etc help your calves thrive. If temperatures drop below 10°C consider the use of calf coats and provide extra colostrum to make up for maintenance losses.

Hygiene – because calves are born with an undeveloped immune system it pays to keep pathogen challenges to a minimum. Keep pens, trailers, equipment and clothing clean. Separate equipment used for sick calves from healthy calves. Provide colostrum for maximum defence. Set up calf pens and protocols to prevent disease spread and pathogen build up i.e. solid partitions, clean dry bedding, and all-in all-out strategies. Some farms require higher levels of prevention strategy for example individual housing is adopted on many farms to minimise spread of disease in high risk situations.

Source: Antahi Innovations. <https://antahi.com>