

Dairy Pipeline

By
Glenn A. Shirk
Extension
Dairy
Agent

**Give 'Em
A Chance**

Your young heifers of today — or tomorrow — have the opportunity of becoming your good herd of the future if you give them the opportunity! You've probably heard me say this before, but I'll repeat it again, "genetically, the best animal in your herd should be one of your present calves, and that calf deserves the same very best care and attention that you give to your very best cow!"

Even though a heifer is not

producing milk and not earning you a monthly milk check, she still deserves proper care and attention. If you've been using good, plus-proven bulls, she has the bred-in potential to produce. Don't put a lid on her ability to produce and to stay in the herd by neglecting her as a heifer.

Your aim ought to be to raise healthy, heifers that are growthy enough to breed at an early age so they will be ready to calve and start earning you can income by 24 months of age. You should also be

striving to breed them to a good, plus-proven bull. Granted, it will be costlier to raise heifers in this fashion, but they'll still be more profitable.

If you are short on facilities, feed and labor, then it would be wise to raise only your best heifers, and only as many as you can care for properly. This is better than trying to raise more than you or your facilities can handle.

Crucial Times

The two most difficult times to keep calves going is 3-4 days after birth, and the first month after weaning.

A lot can be done to minimize stress, and to help the calf through its first week. First of all, provide a clean sanitary maternity area and a clean, dry, draft-free place for the calf, a place that is away from older herdsmates; at this young susceptible age, the calf is not prepared for breathing air laden with germs from older animals. Also be sure the calf consumes colostrum milk within a few hours after birth, and dip the calf's navel cord in tincture of iodine. These are the calf's first lines of defense against invading organisms.

At weaning time the calf is exposed to many stresses: the change from a liquid ration to a dry ration, competition in a group pen, change in feeding techniques (water bowls and mangers vs.

buckets, etc.), exposure to more germs from other animals, dehorning, parasites, vaccines, etc. Your challenge is to ease the calf through these stresses as gradually as possible.

Check with your veterinarian to see what shots a calf might need before and after weaning. Be sure the calf is consuming dry feed before weaning. Keep the calf in its pen or hutch about 10-14 days after weaning. Restrict the number of calves in the first group pen to about 5; ideally, this first pen should be away from older animals to give calves ample opportunity to build-up some resistance to herd organisms.

Don't forget deworming. Calves are particularly susceptible to worms, and should be dewormed about every three months; older heifers — at least twice yearly.

Feeding

Heifers, like cows, need a balanced ration, too. Remember, you want them growthy — not fat, not stunted.

Rumensin is a feed additive that has been approved for use with heifers. It's been used for a number of years to increase weight gains and feed efficiencies in slaughter cattle. Research data indicates that when used on heifers, it can increase daily weight gains 0.2 lbs. and reduce age at first calving by 3.8 days. That's worth considering.

To feed Rumensin, you'll also need to feed some grain too, but that is good. A little grain is one way of force feeding heifers the vitamins and minerals they need for good growth.

Acclimating heifers to grain

may also help reduce foot problems and off-feed problems following calving. Too many good heifers have left herds a few months after calving because of these two problems. Keeping the heifers' ration balanced, acclimating them to grain, avoiding sudden changes in the feeding program, and not pushing heavy grain feeding too soon before nor too soon after calving may help reduce these costly problems.

I mentioned vaccination of calves earlier. I also want to emphasize the importance of working with your veterinarian to develop an immunization program for your herd for cattle of all ages. Also talk about other preventive practices, including foot care.

And, don't overlook the importance of proper housing as a vital part of a preventive care program. Give heifers a dry place to lie down where they have shade in summer and where they can be protected from cold drafts and from adverse weather. Avoid overcrowding, and provide clean feeding facilities.

If heifers are raised in confinement, be sure the barn is well ventilated. In winter, be sure young calves have a dry, protected bed and an adequate intake of energy; cold, wet surfaces can draw a lot of heat out of a calf's body.

Remember, a well-bred growthy heifer, calving early at the proper weight has great potential for becoming a profitable cow; she'll almost always produce better and last longer than a neglected heifer.

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