

Getting ready for the calving season

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To help have a successful calving season you need to be well prepared. It is imperative to have some basic supplies in stock to assist during the calving period including disposable plastic gloves (long and short), gel, paper towel, clean water, calving ropes (minimum of 2 pairs), calving jack, oxytocin, calcium bottles/boluses, iodine for navel, footbaths with disinfectant (change regularly), colostrum (fresh or frozen supply), stomach tube (without cracks), calf tags, notebook/phone app to record information.

Important points to consider prior to the calving season include:

- **Nutrition:** The nutritional needs of the dam are important both before and after calving. Diet is significant before calving due to the growing foetus, mammary regeneration and the production of good quality colostrum. The cow's body condition score also impacts on stamina during parturition, calf vigour, and subsequent rebreeding. Overfed and over fat cows can struggle with calving due to accumulation of fat in the pelvis, making it difficult for the calf to fit through. Fat cows are also more susceptible to metabolic diseases like milk fever, ketosis and displaced abomasum. A high quality pre-calver mineral, for at least 6 weeks before calving is essential. Trace element deficiencies are associated with higher incidences of still births, retained placenta and weak calves and magnesium supplementation before calving is important to prevent milk fever at calving.



- **Herd health:** If some diseases, such as calf scour, have historically been a problem on your farm, review these with your veterinary practitioner. Discuss the likely causes and what can be done to prevent it. This may involve vaccinating the cow pre-calving or giving the calf an oral dose for cryptosporidium from birth. Vaccination is one tool used to manage calf scours but not a silver bullet. If other management procedures are not optimised, including hygiene, housing and colostrum management then you will have poor success from a vaccination programme.
- **Calving sheds and equipment:** Before the calving season begins these should be checked. All gates should open and close easily, while not forgetting the importance of having access to an escape route. Make sure that the calving jack, head gates and lighting are in working order. Cleanliness prior to and during calving is important to reduce spread of disease. Having fresh bedding easily accessible makes it easier to keep pens clean and dry. Ensure the calf shed is well ventilated and without draughts. New-born calves need to be kept warm, with the optimal air temperature for calves under 3 weeks being 15° to 20°C. This can be difficult to achieve in Ireland from January to April, especially in larger calf sheds, but there are ways to overcome this. Ensure the bedding is deep enough to allow calves to nest, add an extra heat source (red light), use calf jackets, or creating cosy areas with straw bales. If calves lie in damp conditions, they will not thrive well and are more susceptible to disease. The importance of a calf having a dry, warm bed is often underestimated.
- **Colostrum:** A calf is born without antibodies and depends on their absorption from colostrum (first milk after calving) to gain immunity until they develop their own immunity at 3 to 4 weeks of age. The ability of the calf to absorb antibodies decreases every hour from birth and stops when the calf is 24 hours old. The simple rule is to use colostrum, from the **first milking**, for the first feed, within **2 hours** of birth and give at least **3 litres** (See our recently revised Colostrum Management leaflet for more information).

