

# 4 key periods to optimise calf health and welfare during the first 3 weeks of life



Animal Health Ireland  
**FACT SHEET**

1. PRE-CALVING

2. WITHIN FIRST HOURS OF BIRTH

3. WITHIN THREE DAYS

4. WITHIN FIRST WEEKS OF LIFE

**ALWAYS:** treat all animals with compassion and respect



AHI gratefully acknowledges the financial and other contributions of our stakeholders.



*Contributing to a profitable and sustainable farming and agri-food sector through improved animal health*

Animal Health Ireland, 2-5 The Archways, Carrick-on-Shannon, Co. Leitrim, N41 WN27

Phone 071 9671928 Email [ahi@animalhealthireland.ie](mailto:ahi@animalhealthireland.ie)

## AHI FACT SHEET

4 key periods to optimise calf health and welfare during the first 3 weeks of life

# 1. PRE-CALVING

1. Prepare the cow appropriately for calving; this includes calving in the correct BCS (target 3.0 – 3.25 BCS) and feeding an appropriate dry cow diet.
2. Prepare the calving area and ensure the calving area is fit for purpose; such that it provides a clean, observable, well drained area for calving and keep it clean, dry and appropriately bedded.
3. If scour vaccines are used on the farm, give to the cow in advance of calving, following manufacturers' guidelines to ensure sufficient antibody levels in colostrum and transition milk.



## 2. WITHIN FIRST HOURS OF BIRTH

1. Move calves as soon as possible after birth to a clean, dry, safe environment to minimise contact with other adult cows and potential transfer of disease.
2. Follow the colostrum 123 rule: feed all calves the first milk the cow produces (colostrum) within 2 hours of birth and feed at least 3 litres.
3. Colostrum quality decreases as the time from calving to milking for the first time increases; collect as soon and as hygienically as possible.
4. Feed transition milk (milkings 2 – 6 after calving) to calves for at least 2 days (4 feeds) after the first colostrum feeding.



## AHI FACT SHEET

4 key periods to optimise calf health and welfare during the first 3 weeks of life

### 3. WITHIN THREE DAYS

1. Feed all calves whole milk or a good quality milk replacer at 15% bodyweight; for example, a minimum of 5 litres for the first week of life, increasing to 6 litres per day from week 2 (for a calf of 35 – 40kg birth weight).
2. Do not feed waste milk or milk with antibiotic residues to calves.
3. Follow manufacturers' guidelines if feeding milk replacer, paying careful attention to water temperature and the quantity of powder per litre of water. A consistent feeding schedule, in which the calf is fed at the same times every day, reduces stress and improves average daily live weight gain.
4. Feed ALL calves milk at least two times per day until they are at least 4-weeks old. If using automatic feeders, ensure these are properly calibrated, and that an appropriate feeding programme is set up.
5. Wash and disinfect all feeding equipment every day and allow it to dry. This includes any stomach tubes or bottles that are being used to feed colostrum to calves (these are frequently forgotten).



### 4. WITHIN FIRST WEEKS OF LIFE

1. Offer fresh water, concentrate feed and clean straw within the first week of life and thereafter. This will promote rumen development.
2. Ensure that calf houses are fit for purpose, being well ventilated and well drained, while ensuring the calves are not exposed to draughts.
3. Ensure that calves have sufficient space within a pen, the minimum requirement is 1.5 m<sup>2</sup>/calf for calves <150kg bodyweight.
4. Keep calf housing clean and dry with adequate clean bedding provided regularly (ideally straw).
5. Treat all calves with a local anaesthetic (which may be obtained on prescription from veterinary practitioners) when disbudding. They can be castrated, other than by a veterinary practitioner, before it attains 6 months of age using a Burdizzo or before it attains 8 days of age using a rubber ring, in both cases without the use of anaesthesia. Over these age limits, local anaesthesia, using a prescription only medicine (POM), must be administered by a veterinary practitioner to animals intended for castration. Use of analgesia (pain relief) for both procedures is also advised.



### 4. WITHIN FIRST WEEKS OF LIFE (cont.)

6. Seek advice from your vet to put a suitable vaccination programme in place for calf pneumonia if applicable.
7. Have a biosecurity plan – ensure boots and clothing are clean when moving between different groups of animals to avoid cross-contamination. Restrict access of visitors to calf rearing areas. Isolate sick calves. Feed calves in order of youngest to oldest.
8. Monitor calves closely for signs disease, such as not drinking milk, having wet tails, scour, pneumonia, or raised temperature.
9. If selling calves, adhere to Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine regulations and Teagasc advice on best practice for transporting calves<sup>1</sup>.



Further information can be obtained from Irish produced resources on calf management:  
See the CalfCare section of the AHI website <http://animalhealthireland.ie/>

<sup>1</sup> <http://animalhealthireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/CalfCare-Booklet-WebVersion.pdf>