

Getting your calves

Weaning is a stressful period for both you and the calf.

Get your weaning strategy wrong, and all your hard work over the past eight to ten months goes out the window. In order to help you plan your weaning strategy, over the next six weeks we will be looking at what steps you can take to make sure you win the weaning challenge, and secure your €40 payment under the Suckler Cow Welfare Scheme.

A schedule of the topics to be covered over the next six weeks is outlined in the contents box. This week, we look at what steps can be taken in advance of weaning to ensure calves are in good health ahead of the high stress period. Pneumonia is one of the main challenges threatening calf health during weaning. In whichever form it presents itself, the consequences on farm output can be devastating.

High mortality rates, increased vet bills and reduced animal performance are just some of the ways an outbreak can hit your bottom line.

While the stress factor does provide an ideal opportunity for pneumonia to take hold, it is often a combination of factors that result in an outbreak. These can range from weather conditions, herd health status and shed ventilation to poor weaning practices. Pneumonia will not be a problem in a healthy animal weaned from its mother in the correct fashion.



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BELOW: Bull calves and heifer calves should be grazed separately.

Building your calves' defences

Ensuring you have an adequate herd health programme in place is essential to avoiding any health issues at weaning.

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I often compare a calf's lungs to the fuel filter on a tractor. You will get away with a dirty fuel filter while you are toddling around the yard feeding a few cattle.

However, put a 2000 gallon slurry tanker on behind, and head up the road, and you will soon see the impact on performance.

A calf's lungs are the same — but instead of dirt, there are worms. A spring calf that has not been dosed over the summer will often appear to be fine, perhaps coughing a little when you move them from field to field.

However, the weaning pro-

cedure is similar to putting the tanker onto the back of your tractor. When the lungs really have to work, what happens? They pack in and you have a calf standing with its tongue out, gasping for breath — or, even worse, you have a dead calf.

You could invest €40,000 to €50,000 in a new tractor, but if you fail to spend €10 of €15 on a fuel filter, it will have no more power than a Massey 135.

Farmers invest in top-of-the-range heifers and use top-quality sires to produce good quality weanlings. Yet because they fail to invest €2 or €3 in a summer worm dose, they end up with an animal that has a lower market value than a Jersey bull calf.

DOSING PLAN

Advice on dosing will largely depend on how calves have been treated over the first part of the grazing season. Therefore, for farm-specific advice, you should consult with your vet.

In most cases, all spring-born calves should have received at least one worm dose at this stage. If not, a worm treatment should be administered right away.

Advice on when to administer the second dose will also depend on previous dosing history and projected weaning date.

MIDSUMMER

In general terms, a spring-born calf should receive a midsummer dose with an Avermectin-based product, followed by a second treatment two or three weeks before weaning.

Calves that are not going to be weaned until late in the season will possibly require three treatments.

However, if housing is to take place immediately after weaning, the pre-weaning dose will eliminate the need for further treatment at housing.

Dosing should not be carried out two or three days before weaning, nor within

two weeks after weaning. When an animal is wormed, it must discharge the dead worms from the lungs by coughing them up, and then swallowing them into the stomach, where they are then digested and passed out in the dung.

This process can actually increase the level of stress on the lungs for a short period, especially if there is a heavy worm burden.

Therefore, dosing calves during the weaning process will only pile on the pressure.

If you skip the mid-summer dose, you will be playing with fire come weaning.

At 100kg to 200kg live-weight, it will cost you from 80c to €1.50 per head to worm a calf with an Avermectin pour-on, and approximately 50c/kg head for the injection.

In total, your two worm doses (first in midsummer and a second two or three weeks pre-weaning) will cost you less than €4 per head. Don't be a penny wise and pound foolish.



SPECIAL SUCKLER SERIES
WINNING THE WEANING CHALLENGE

Livestock Editor Justin McCarthy examines strategies for profitable weaning and ensuring you receive your €40 per calf payment in the Suckler Cow Welfare Scheme.

THIS WEEK

Weanling health in advance of weaning including dosing, vaccination and creep grazing.

Week 2

Feeding the right ration including meal feeding levels for bulls and heifers, price survey and creep feeding methods.

Week 3

Various methods of weaning including weaning regulations.

Week 4

Completing the pre & post weaning forms including the Irish Farmers Journal special weaning calculator.

Week 5

Managing the calf post weaning and ensuring calf remains healthy up until selling.

Week 6

Managing the cow post weaning including reducing feed costs, body condition scoring and cow health.