

SPECIAL SUCKLER SERIES

WINNING THE WEANING CHALLENGE

Livestock editor Justin McCarthy looks at the best way to manage your cows post-weaning

THIS WEEK

'Winning the weaning' series available to download at www.farmersjournal.ie

This is the last in a six-part series looking at what steps farmers should take to ensure that they 'win the weaning challenge'. The six-week series covered:

- Weaning health
- Feeding the right ration
- Weaning methods
- Completing the pre and post weaning forms
- Managing the calf post weaning
- Management of the cow post weaning.

It will be available to download at www.farmersjournal.ie from next week. We hope you enjoyed the series and found it informative. Wishing you every success this autumn.

— JUSTIN MCCARTHY



Don't forget to focus on the cow post weaning

Up until this week, our special series focusing on 'winning the weaning challenge' has detailed what steps should be taken to ensure the calf remains healthy and continues to thrive during the weaning process. However, this week, the final week of our six-part series, we are going to focus on the cow.

It is important to remember that weaning is a highly stressful period for the cow as well as the calf. Therefore, for the two to three days after weaning, steps should be taken to avoid placing any additional stress on the cow.

ADVICE

While the advice is often to restrict feed in order to dry cows off, the reality is that come autumn most cows are nearly dry already.

Severely restricting feed to cows immediately post weaning will increase stress levels and, in doing so, increase the risk of cows going down with magnesium deficiency.

Each year, the incidents of cows suffering from magnesium deficiency peak in April/May and, again, in late September/October.

For two to three days post weaning, you should ensure that cows have an adequate supply of grass or, where moved indoors, receive an adequate supply of fodder. It does not need to be the best quality grass or silage on the farm.

In fact, stemmy swards are often better as the grass will



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contain higher levels of magnesium.

Often, farmers cease magnesium supplementation as soon as weaning takes place. However, it is important to continue to offer cows some form of supplementation (licks, minerals, etc) until they get over the stress of weaning, especially during

periods of cold and unsettled weather.

Early intervention is key to ensuring cows suffering from magnesium deficiency make a full recovery. Therefore, herds should be checked twice daily for a week after weaning. The key signs to look out for when herding are cows:

- Restless and excited
- Unsteady on their feet
- Trembling
- Aggressive

It is essential that you intervene carefully where you suspect that a cow is showing early signs of magnesium deficiency.

Increasing stress levels will quickly advance the condi-

tion, causing the cow to go off her feet.

Where this is the case or where you find a cow already down and thrashing around on the ground, then you should call your vet immediately. Make sure to inform them that you believe it to be magnesium deficiency as time will be of the essence.

Use weaning to identify next year's culls

WEANING is a good time to see cows in their working clothes. Come the autumn there is nowhere for the poor quality cows in the herd that are not doing their job to hide.

After a good grazing summer, all cows in the herd should be coming in at a body condition score of at least 2.5.

Thin cows should be pulled aside and examined to identify why they have failed to put on condition.

Examine their feet, mouth, udder and look at their age. If problems are identified, they should be earmarked for culling next year.

It is also worth looking at the calf she is leaving behind — perhaps it is just a case that she has given everything to the calf over the summer.

If so, then either try to build condition prior to hous-

ing or pen separately at housing and feed 1kg to 2kg of concentrate until body condition score reaches 2.5.

Similarly, you should look at the weight and conformation of the calves that the over fat cows in the herd are leaving behind.

It is often the case that these fat cows are doing a better job of feeding themselves than their calf. These underperforming cows should be earmarked for culling.

It is also worth identifying the mothers of the bottom 15% of calves in the herd. Unless there is a reason as to why the calf is in the bottom 15%, e.g. it suffered from a pneumonia outbreak etc, its mother should also be earmarked for culling.

Keeping these cows in the herd will continue to eat

away at the profit generated by the top performing cows.

Ideally, you should have already scanned the herd and removed any empty cows prior to weaning the main herd.

Empty cows should either be fed for slaughter or sold as feeding cows. No matter how good, they should not be given a second chance.

Unfortunately, some farmers opt to wean empty cows with the main herd and send them to the abattoir the following day.

In most cases, these cows will not achieve their full potential and would realise a much higher value if either retained on the farm and fed intensively for a period of five to six weeks or sold live in the mart as feeding cows. For the majority of small herds, the option of selling

cull cows live is often the best route as the specialised cow feeders around the ring are able to negotiate a much higher beef price in the factory when selling and incur much lower feed costs.

HERD HEALTH

It is good management practice to take a blood sample from cull cows prior to selling them.

In most cases, the cull cow will act as a treasure chest of information as to the health status of your herd. Either she will have been culled on age and, therefore, will have been in the herd long enough to have been exposed to any viruses in circulation or she will be culled because there is a fertility issue. This will make her a prime candidate to show up any fertility related disease issues.

You should consult your vet as to the best menu of diseases to test cows for specific to your farm.

TLC

It is important to pull aside the first calving cows after weaning. In most cases, they will have lost significant body condition over the summer, even when on good quality grass.

These cows should receive some Tender Loving Care (TLC) over the coming months in order to increase condition.

Where possible, try and house them separately from the main herd over the winter and feed according to condition.

Again, you want to have them up to a body condition score of 2.5 when calving down next spring.