

Calf scours

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Scours, or diarrhoea, is a common condition seen in beef calves during the first 6 weeks of life. Scours in calves may be caused by a wide range of organisms including bacteria, viruses and protozoa. These organisms are common and may be shed in the faeces of healthy adult cattle. In addition, nutritional scours may be seen where cows are grazing high quality feed and producing plenty of milk.

Because calves are born without immunity to disease they are particularly susceptible early in life. They rely on intake of adequate colostrum to provide protection against disease. As a result anything that reduces the intake of colostrum can predispose to calf scours. One of the most common causes of reduced colostrum intake in beef calves is a prolonged or difficult birth. The quality of colostrum may also be lower in heifers as compared to cows, making the calves of heifers more susceptible. Poor mothering may also be a contributing factor in heifers.

Scours in calves leads to a loss of electrolytes and water in the faeces, a reduced milk intake and changes in the normal bacterial population in the bowel. Dehydration is a common cause of death in scouring calves. As the level of dehydration in a calf increases the calf will become more depressed, will stop suckling, the eyeballs will sink and the gums become sticky or dry. Because calves have very limited energy reserves their blood glucose can quickly become low leading to weakness, depression and convulsions.

Treatment

Some calves with scours will recover without treatment. If the calf is scouring but still bright and suckling it should be identified and monitored. If the calf is no longer suckling or can be easily caught in the paddock then it is likely it will need some form of treatment. Initial treatment should be aimed at correcting the dehydration by using oral electrolyte solutions. Calves can be treated with oral electrolytes and left with their mother. It is important to recognise that many electrolyte solutions contain little energy and are not suitable as the sole feed for calves for more than 24 hours. A tube feeder such as a McGraths feeder is an easy and quick way to deliver fluids to calves, especially those with a poor suck reflex. If calves are unable to stand and have no suck reflex then fluids given directly into the vein may be the most appropriate.

Most calves with diarrhoea do not have a bacterial infection so antibiotics may not be required. Antibiotics may be indicated where there is blood in the scour or to prevent secondary bacterial overgrowth in the bowel. Some causes of calf scours such as cryptosporidia and coccidiosis require specific medication therefore an accurate diagnosis should be sought when multiple cases are seen. Faecal samples collected from scouring

calves may be used to help identify the bug involved – this will enable the most appropriate treatment and prevention strategies to be developed. Antibiotics should only be used in scouring calves after consulting your vet.

In recent years there has been increased interest and use of probiotics either as an aid in prevention of scours or following antibiotic treatment.

Further information on calf scours is available from your local LHPA district veterinarian or local private vet. There is also some excellent information on calf scours in the publications section on the Meat and Livestock Australia website at <http://www.mla.com.au/Publications-tools-and-events>.