

Colostrum management—get it right

Poor colostrum management and low vaccination rates are the two main reasons why so many UK dairy and beef units continue to struggle with costly and debilitating calf scour problems.

According to results from the latest independent national calf scour survey of 800 UK calf rearers far too many farmers are still struggling with the disease—but doing so unnecessarily, advisers claim.

“Calf scour is not something farmers have to accept as an occupational hazard,” says vet Paddy Gordon, from XL Vets’ practice the Shepton Veterinary Group, who advised on the survey project. “It is a disease you can get on top of provided you follow some sound management practices.

“Last year’s survey results show that more than one in four farmers (27.5%) have experienced a severe scour problem over the last 12 months—defined as more than 10% of their calves affected (see table below). That’s far too high and these farmers really need to get their vet involved to help them overcome the problem.”

Actually, the survey does reveal that when faced with a scour outbreak, virtually all farmers would consult their vet (94.3%)

rather than any other adviser, but this tends to be only when faced with a severe problem. More than 80% of those responding to the survey claim to only involve the vet when several calves are affected or when they find themselves dealing with a bad outbreak.

“It is vital that farmers seek advice when scour problems first start,” Paddy Gordon urges. “It is much easier to get on top of a mild or moderate problem, but when it becomes severe there is often too much challenge around to clear disease up quickly. And there are a core of farmers (32.5%) who appear to be too reliant on antibiotics for disease treatment, particularly when you consider rotavirus and cryptosporidia are two of the biggest infectious disease causes—both of which won’t respond to antibiotic treatment.”

That rotavirus and cryptosporidia remain the two key infectious causes of calf scour is confirmed by the survey. On farms that have had a causative disease organism identified, rotavirus was detected in 45.7% of cases and cryptosporidia in 32.7%. E.coli K99 (24.7%) and coronavirus (12.4%) were also significant pathogens. Farms struggling with a scour problem where diagnostic

work has not yet been carried out are advised to talk to their vet as soon as possible.

On a positive note, Paddy Gordon says it is encouraging to see farmers appreciating the need to feed more colostrum to calves. “A few years ago you would not have found many producers feeding more than three litres to their calves, but the survey shows that over half the farmers responding to the survey questionnaire (51.8%) now do this in early life.

“Feeding a healthy quantity of colostrum is good, but quality is vital and what farmers now need to focus on is making sure that the colostrum they do feed to their calves is of excellent quality.

“It is a concern that over 10% of producers see the first two to four day’s milk as colostrum, which is not the case—it is only the first milk that is defined as

colostrum.”

According to the results of the survey, over half the respondents (53.7%) have never checked the quality of the colostrum they are feeding, and only about one in four (23.4%) always test it (see table below).

What’s more, over 80% have never tested calf antibody status by asking their vet to take blood samples to check if their colostrum feeding regime is adequate.

“We have found calf blood testing to be a really useful tool in assessing whether colostrum feeding regimes are working on farm,” adds Paddy Gordon.

Do farmers check the quality of colostrum?

Yes—always	23.4%
Sometimes	22.9%
Never	53.7%

Search begins for mastitis vaccine

A vaccine to prevent bacterial mastitis in dairy cattle is being undertaken by MSD Animal Health. The company has signed an agreement with researchers in Holland to embark on the development of innovative vaccination strategies against udder infections.

The objective is to develop a series of vaccines against difficult to treat infections with certain bacteria known to cause bovine mastitis—including *Staphylococcus aureus*, *Streptococcus uberis* and *Escherichia coli*.

The project is part of the ALTANT (ALternatives for ANTibiotics) programme that is coordinated by Immuno Valley, a public-private research consortium.

Dr Paul Vermeij, senior project leader at MSD Animal Health’s Discovery & Technology Department in Boxmeer (the Netherlands) explains: “The technologies developed within the ALTANT programme may result in an efficacious vaccine against bovine mastitis. In combination with our current therapeutic tools, it can result in unprecedented possibilities to control the disease. In addition to improvement of animal welfare and economic advantages for the farmer, such a vaccine can also contribute to a responsible use of antibiotics.”

Proportion of calves affected by scours last year

Number of calves affected	7.2%
1-5% of calves affected	44.8%
6-10% of calves affected	27.7%
11-30% of calves affected	18.2%
31-50% of calves affected	5.4%
More than 50% of calves affected	3.9%