

Take care at housing to avoid pneumonia threat

Overcrowding as calves grow can lead to respiratory disease, reports **Rachael Porter**

A dry, clean and draught-free environment is vital if you're going to avoid pneumonia problems with your calves as we head for winter, advises Wiltshire-based vet Chris Price.

Mr Price, a partner in the Drove Veterinary Hospital in Swindon, part of the XL Vet Group, points out that the disease costs the UK dairy industry millions of pounds each year, in fatalities and treatment alone.

Then there's the lost potential in terms of future milk production – yet still producers aren't 'getting it right' when it comes to preventing pneumonia.

"If the obvious and immediate losses aren't enough to focus producers' minds, they should consider the on-going impact on production – in other words growth rate – that calf pneumonia

can have," Mr Price says.

"It knocks back the age at first calving and reduces lactation efficiency during the first few years in the herd. That's if she makes it to the milking herd at all. A recent UK study showed that 14% of heifers born fail to make it to first calving.

"The number-one reason for this is respiratory disease. That thought alone should be enough to focus producers' attention on preventing pneumonia this autumn."

Changeable weather, as we're seeing at the moment, never helps. "So following best practice, at all times, is essential," Mr Price adds.

Poorly ventilated housing is a key causal factor on many units.

"One of the more common mistakes that I see on farm is overcrowding – as animals grow they



take up more airspace. Housing conditions might have been adequate for 12 baby calves, but not 12 three-month-old heifers. This is why producers can see breakdowns in midwinter. So make sure you allow at least 13 cubic metres and two square metres of lying area per calf."

Producers should also avoid using straw blowers to bed down calves. "It's one of my pet hates," Mr Price says. "Showering the calf with dust and small pieces of straw creates a challenge to the calf's natural respiratory defence mech-

anisms. It irritates the lungs and this 'stress' gives any bugs that are around a chance to take hold."

He also believes multiple procedures can overwhelm the calf and the resulting stress can cause a dip in its immunity and ability to fight off infection.

"So avoid carrying out dehorning and weaning at the same time – and castrating if you're dealing with bull beef calves. Spacing procedures can be a 'labour' issue, but think how much more labour is required to treat calves with pneumonia," Mr Price concludes.

DAIRYCO DATUM LEAGUE TABLE (Aug)

	Price (ppl)	Monthly change (%)
Dairy Crest Waitrose	30.90	-1.27
Wiseman Sainsbury	31.88	+5.24
Wiseman Tesco	31.00	+5.08
Arla Tesco	29.50	-
First Milk Tesco	29.23	-0.30
Dairy Crest Sainsbury – Profile	30.09	-0.82
Arla Asda	27.35	+0.21
Arla non-aligned	26.60	+0.22
Wiseman Partnership	27.75	+6.07
Arla AFMP	26.35	+0.22
Barber AJ & RG	29.66	+4.76
Dairy Crest Cheese Davidstow – Profile	27.58	+0.62
Dairy Crest Liquid – Profile	26.14	-0.94
Milk Link Manufacturing – Seasonal	26.30	+1.07
Wyke Farms	29.85	+1.80
Belton Cheese	na	na
South Caernarfon Creameries	24.13	+2.85
Glanbia Llangefni	25.85	+1.29
Milk Link Manufacturing – A&B	26.38	+1.11
First Milk Balancing Liquid	25.76	-
First Milk Liquid	25.60	-
First Milk Cheese	25.58	+0.82

• The milk prices listed above will vary according to the amount of milk required by each retailer. The milk price above assumes all litres produced are sold into the dedicated milk pools. Farmers signed up with the Promar costings survey get an additional 0.50ppl. This is a condensed version of the DairyCo milk price league table. The full table can be seen at www.dairyco.org.uk/datum.aspx

Is vaccination the answer?

Where there's a known viral problem, vaccination offers a cost-effective option for prevention of respiratory disease. Vaccine use should be carefully considered in consultation with your vet and targeted to choose the right product for the particular virus, or combination of viruses, which has been diagnosed on your unit.

An intra-nasal vaccine is best for use on very young calves to promote early onset of immunity in the upper respiratory tract.

A course of injectable vaccine is often more suitable for use in calves that are more than three months of age, to produce long-lasting protection during the winter housing period.

Vaccination is not, however, a panacea and its effect will be limited where calf housing and husbandry are less than ideal.

TREATMENT TIPS

Treatment should be swift and always involve administering antibiotics and a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug (NSAID). The former will tackle bacterial infection and protect susceptible calves with a viral infection against a secondary bacterial infection, while the latter will reduce calf temperature and lung inflammation.

Prompt treatment with a NSAID will also limit lung scarring and speed recovery, making it more likely that the calf will reach its full potential.

Inadequate or delayed treatment will increase damage to lung tissues which may predispose to recurrent respiratory problems for the heifer in later life and will compromise future performance delaying age at first calving.