

Plan weaning on suckler farms

Late autumn is a time when many farmers will make decisions about when to wean the spring-calving suckler herd calves.

Andy Adler, director of Synergy Farm Health, says this decision may be based on whether calves are going to market, are to be moved to another holding or if they are going to be finished or stored.

He says: "In any situation, it is important to understand why you are weaning, when you plan to do it and how to do it to achieve the best possible outcome."

Mr Adler says it is crucial spring-calving cows have the optimum body condition score (BCS) to take them through winter and calve with a BCS of 2.5.

Condition

"If cows are currently in good condition and there is plenty of food on the ground, then leaving the calves with their mothers for an extra couple of weeks can support further growth of the calf and control the grass.

"Weaning also allows the diet of the calf to change. Ideally, calves going on to a concentrate-based diet should be introduced to it at least two weeks prior to weaning, allowing their rumens to become conditioned to the new diet, decreasing the food changes and, therefore, reducing growth checks at weaning."

If possible, Mr Adler says any stressful procedures should be carried out prior to weaning.

"Castration and dehorning should be completed two weeks beforehand to allow wounds to heal and inflammation to subside.

"Consideration should also be given to preconditioning vaccination before weaning. If there

is a history of respiratory disease at weaning, allowing calves to build up immunity before the respiratory challenge helps the vaccine work better for increased prevention of disease.

Fluke management

"Worming and fluke management should be discussed with your farm vet, as weaning can be an ideal time to control some of these issues."

Mr Adler says the use of nose flaps for weaning is a concept which a client at Synergy Farm Health took from Canada.

"Farmers using them report less stressful weaning, a decrease in bawling and less disruption on-farm with happier and healthier calves who settle well after separation."

He says fitting nose flaps can be organised around TB testing, with the flap inserted on day one and removed on the day of reading.

For farmers selling immediately, calves are often fuller in the



Weaning is an ideal time to tackle issues such as worming and fluke management, says Mr Adler.

belly at market, more relaxed in the ring and better able to cope with a new farm. If housing

straight away, there will be less noise and better feed intakes.

All of these factors should

lead to a decrease in stress, making the calves more resilient to respiratory disease.

Considerations with the different weaning techniques

Weaning technique	Method	Considerations
Total separation	Cows and calves separated. Calves remain where they were and cows moved a significant distance away	Careful management needed to avoid stress in calves and determined animals may break down fences. Considered the most stressful way to wean calves
Fence line separation	Cows and calves separated by a strong fence so there can be nose to nose contact	Less calf stress. Takes at least five days before cows are moved. If calves are not used to drinking from troughs leave them overflowing so calves hear water trickling.
Creep weaning	Creep gate allows calves to pass through into lush pasture leaving their mothers during the day. Once calves are used to feeding away from the cows close gate off	Minimal stress for the calves however requires significant preparation and supervision
Weaning nose flaps	Insert nose flap into calves and keep calves with the cows. Four to seven days later remove calves from cows	Calves spend 25 per cent more time eating. 95 per cent fall in bawling and significantly less pacing leads to more efficient and less stressful weaning