

Help your customers to stop the cough

We spoke to Cheshire-based calf rearer and dairy producer **Karen Halton** for some tips to help prevent calf pneumonia

Beef and dairy producers know the importance of colostrum and good housing and hygiene, yet calf pneumonia still has a devastating impact on some units. Calf pneumonia, be it viral or bacterial, is a complex disease. It's tough to prevent it, but it is possible, with good husbandry and a little support from the vet. No one knows that more than dairy producer Karen Halton.

Charged with rearing 550 calves a year at the three dairy units that comprise Rode Farms, near Congleton in Cheshire, Karen sees the 250 or so heifers born each year as the business's most precious assets.

"They're the future of the dairy herd, so it's well worth lavishing attention on them to ensure they have the best chance of performing to their optimum profit poten-

"People thought I was a bit cuckoo over these calves and saw other jobs on the farm as being more important"

tial when fully grown lactating cows," she says.

UNDER CONTROL

With the advisory support that comes with being part of the KW Compass Programme, Karen's hard work is starting to pay off and calf pneumonia and other dis-

eases are now under control.

"Calf mortality, much of it the result of calf pneumonia, was high when I took on this role – between 20 and 30 calves a year, if not more. Hard to ignore, even at the scale we're running at," she says.

"Because I was coming to the unit from a non-farming background, I was pretty shocked, and I was determined to reduce that figure as much as possible."

Her first priority is to ensure that calves drink as much good quality colostrum as possible immediately after birth.

"The calf's immune system is under-developed and it has none of its own antibodies to fight disease, so the timing, quality, volume and cleanliness of colostrum received is absolutely crucial to long-term calf health," she says.

After calving, calves are separated from their mother within an hour and fed a minimum of three litres of colostrum – tested for quality using a colostrometer – either immediately or within the first six hours of life. This is then followed by between three and five litres in two separate, bottled daily feeds for a minimum of three days. Stomach tubing is a last resort if the calves won't take the colostrum.

ROUTINE CARE

Karen ensures a consistent rearing routine, and gives calves enough space and natural light as she can to min-

imise stress. The calf house is clean, dry and well ventilated without being draughty. Water vessels and feeding buckets/troughs are regularly disinfected, and where possible the calf housing gets at least two months' rest each year to minimise cross contamination.

As a result of this regime, as well as keeping pens clean and dry with good ventilation, calf pneumonia is now

minimal and mortality is low. "It's a rare thing if the fallen stock lorry comes for a calf," adds Karen.

A shot of pneumonia vaccine Bovipast RSP is also given at 10 days old as extra insurance, under the advice of vet Mike Christie.

"Pneumonia can have long-term repercussions. Lung scarring from a severe case can see a heifer being sent off on the lorry before we

SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS – THE GOOD AND THE BAD

'Almost 60% of producers have lost calves to pneumonia during the past year, with half seeing the disease in more than 5% of their young stock.'

That's the headline finding from a recent independent disease incidence and management survey of more than 750 UK beef and dairy producers. But there's also some good news – despite the widespread prevalence of pneumonia, the survey results show some encouraging signs that producers are improving disease management practices.

"When it comes to preventing calf pneumonia problems on UK cattle units, it is reassuring to see that producers are recognising the importance of good management practices. For example, nearly three quarters of the respondents (74.5%) said they pay good attention to colostrum feeding and more than 85% are attempting to manage the environmental risk factors," says vet James Allcock, from the XLVets practice Lambert, Leonard and May, who advised on the survey project.

"There are also encouraging signs in the way farmers are treating animals showing signs of the disease. Nearly 50% now claim to be using a combination antibiotic/anti-inflammatory product, such as Resflor. This is what we would recommend for treating clinically sick animals – an effective antibiotic is required to kill bacteria quickly to stop the disease spreading further and the anti-inflammatory reduces inflammation, limiting permanent lung damage and also helping to ensure a speedy recovery."



KAREN'S SIX-POINT GUIDE TO BETTER CALF REARING

- 1 **Colostrum:** feed as much high quality colostrum as possible in the first few days. At least three litres in the first six hours of life and aim for 10 litres in the first day.
- 2 **Patience:** take time to observe calves and keep calm. Attention to detail pays off and allows problems to be picked up early.
- 3 **Consistency:** stick to a proven rearing routine.
- 4 **Hygiene:** keep the calf environment and feeding/drinking utensils scrupulously clean.
- 5 **Stress-free:** minimise stress and enjoy better growth rates.
- 6 **Health protocols:** reduce the risk and impact of disease by working with your vet on implementing proven vaccination and treatment protocols.



even try to get her in calf and into the milking herd. So prevention is key and a belt-and-braces approach works for us.”

Observation is vital too and Karen also spends a lot of time with the calves, look-

ing for early signs of any problems.

“I know that on some units if staff were caught looking at calves for 15 minutes they might get a dressing down for slacking. But spending time calmly with

the future milkers in your herd is really important.

“We take time each day to observe the calves’ behaviour and identify any feeding or health issues, which can be treated before they get out of hand. That saves time

and money in the long run.

“People thought I was a bit cuckoo over these calves and saw other jobs on the farm as being more important. But they are coming round now. Health, strong beef calves mean money in

the bank and our heifer calves will eventually put money in the tank.

“Making sure you maximise both revenue streams with a bit of care and attention is just common sense,” adds Karen.