



*Suckler calves will gain protection against scours by drinking plenty of high quality colostrum from their mothers.*

# Losing too many calves to scours?

*A recent survey suggests one in five suckler producers is losing too many calves to early life scour problems. A simple cow vaccination regime could make all the difference.*

Increasing the number of calves reared by cows or heifers put to the bull is central to making a suckler herd more profitable. With a year's cow output at stake, you simply can't afford to lose newborn calves to preventable scours. Yet it seems too many beef producers are still struggling with this costly health problem.

Calf scours cost money. ADAS estimates the cost of a disease outbreak in a 100-cow suckler herd (assuming 90 calves born) to be £5794. The potential cost saving of preventing the problem by vaccinating cows pre-calving is, therefore, more than £4000. That's a pretty healthy financial benefit.

In an independent survey of more than 50 suckler producers farming throughout England, Scotland and Wales, conducted as the winter 2014/15 issue of *Sheep and Beef Producer* went to press, 19% of those interviewed admitted they had lost between 1% and 5% of their calves to scours over the last 12 months. About half the calves affected by the disease were between eight and 21 days of age.

Commenting on the findings, youngstock vet Oliver Tilling from the Shepton Vet Group based in Somerset said it was likely that most of the affected calves in this age bracket were suffering from scours caused by pathogens such as rotavirus, coronavirus and the cryptosporidium parasite.

"These pathogens are ubiquitous in the

calf rearing environment, with rotavirus and cryptosporidia thought to be present on most farms. It's simply not possible to eradicate this infection threat – and the pathogen challenge does build up as the spring calving season progresses – so the disease risk is always present," he says.

The ubiquitous nature of rotavirus is confirmed by the survey findings with almost a third of producers saying the pathogen had been formally diagnosed in their calves at some point. Indeed, of those farmers that had had scour faecal samples tested, it was the leading pathogen identified.

"When you see a scouring calf it's impossible to tell the cause from a simple visual examination. What you must do is test a series of faecal samples from five or six scouring calves. Your vet can do this quite quickly thanks to a simple diagnostic kit, which is subsidised by MSD Animal Health," says Mr Tilling.

What is encouraging from the survey is that most suckler producers say they would talk to their vet about scouring calves. However, one in five farmers say they would only seek a formal diagnosis in the event of a serious disease outbreak and 29% said they never get their vet involved in making one.

"When you consider that it pays to know your enemy before implementing the most cost effective disease management regime, it's well worth taking advantage of the simple

diagnostic service that is on offer."

When it comes to preventing scours gaining a foothold on a unit, Mr Tilling says that good calving pen hygiene and making sure cows are producing plenty of high quality colostrum are the keys to effective disease management in suckler herds. "Quality, quantity and quickly are the rules for colostrum feeding and while newborn suckled calves tend to take care of 'quickly and quantity', suckler herd producers can certainly take steps to boost colostrum quality," he says.

"One of the most effective ways of reducing calf scours in suckler herds caused by rotavirus, coronavirus and *E.coli* K99 is to vaccinate the dam between one and three months pre-calving with a single shot of the Rotavec™ Corona vaccine. This increases the concentration of protective antibodies in her colostrum so that the newborn calf benefits, provided it drinks enough of this fortified colostrum in the first few hours and days of life." (Ideally 10-12% of bodyweight).

According to the survey results, only one in five suckler producers are using this highly effective vaccine, which suggests disease management could be much improved on many units. What is particularly concerning is the fact that those producers interviewed believed antibiotic treatment to be a more effective disease control strategy than vaccination.

"Most calves affected by infectious scours won't respond to antibiotics," Mr Tilling stresses. "The key infectious disease causes are viral or parasitic, which means antibiotics won't be at all effective."



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**Oliver Tilling, Shepton Vet Group**

*Look out for more practical tips from experts that will be delivered by the new Keeping Britain's Youngstock Healthy campaign – to be launched in the summer.*