

Supplementing your calf's defences against diseases

AS CALVES are born with virtually no antibodies against diseases, it is vital that they receive protection in their first weeks. Usually, mother's milk is the best medicine, but sometimes it is necessary to supplement this.

Why is colostrum so important for newborn calves and lambs?

They're born with hardly any protective antibodies to fend off disease. Normally their dam's colostrum provides the high level of antibodies, which protects them for the first few weeks of life. Because it's so effective at preventing disease, you should regard it as being THE best medicine you will ever give to your livestock! You just need to ensure that they get enough quality colostrum and get it early.

How much is enough and how early is early?

COLOSTRUM

John Macfarlane BVM&S, MRCVS, of Alnorthumbria Veterinary Group, Alnwick, advises on why mother's milk is best

Simple rule of thumb is "six pints (or ten per cent of bodyweight) by six hours at the very latest" for calves, and "50ml/kg bodyweight within four hours" for lambs.

So why bother with colostrum alternatives?

Most of the time you don't need to. But channels in the gut wall, through which antibodies pass into the bloodstream, are only open for up to 24 hours after birth. That's a narrow time window for colostrum to give effective systemic cover.

You need to supplement if the dam is short of colostrum; she leaks milk prior to suckling; she has poor-quality col-

ostrum; and weak newborns don't suckle properly or soon enough.

So it's just a case of freezing some colostrum or getting some from my mate's dairy farm next door?

Yes and no! Normally, collecting colostrum for a weak calf from its dam is best. Next best is from another dam on your own farm. But, even this can be risky if you have Johne's Disease or Salmonella dublin in cattle or sheep on your farm, or Mycoplasma bovis in your cattle. These spread through milk. We advise using purchased colostrum alternatives instead of cohort dams' colostrum on farms where the



RECOMMENDATION: Veterinarian John MacFarlane

status for these infections is test for it. Clearly these risks are completely unknown when sourcing colostrum from another farm, even if he is your mate. Additionally, for lambs,

We are confirming increasing numbers of Johne's-infected flocks and herds when we

there's a small risk of severe anaemia in a small number of flocks where cow colostrum is used. We strongly discourage using colostrum from any farm except your own. Using colostrum from dams recently treated with antibiotics promotes antibiotic resistance.

It seems I need to buy some colostrum alternative anyway

Yes, always have some ready as part of the advance preparation for lambing/calving and take care to use them correctly. Those with lower antibody content are supplements for topping up natural colostrum. The few with higher levels can replace it altogether.

Since 2010, only Enzotic Bovine Leucosis-free EU-manufactured colostrum alternatives may be imported. Some also certify freedom from Johne's and IBR.

My strong recommendation is to get advice from your vet on which to use.