

Practical guide to feeding calves

Every calf rearing system is different. Housing set up, feeding system and chosen feed curve should be based on the objectives of the farm and labour availability. To ensure success and consistency, it is crucial that the science is applied with practical considerations in mind.

Colostrum 1

Colostrum is the first critical step in calf nutrition. All calves should receive 4 litres of clean, high antibody colostrum within 4 hours after birth. This should be followed up by a further 2 litres within 12 hours of birth.

Feeding frequency and timing

Elevated volumes can be achieved on many systems, including twice a day feeding systems. Specific and consistent feeding times, with adequate time between feeds, are crucial when aiming to feed more milk.

Milk replacer quality

Ensure you use a high quality, low osmolality formulation to avoid gastrointestinal challenges. LifeStart endorsed Energized Calf Milk can be safely fed at 4+ litres per feed. Increasing the frequency of feeds allows you to feed more than 10 litres per day.

Focus from week 1 2

Feed to appetite in the first week with the aim of calves reaching at least 8 litres per day by day 7.

- It is easier to program calves for greater portion sizes when implemented in the first week.
- The higher the energy intakes the sooner you can insulate against the calf's vulnerabilities.

Feeding method

Consider teat feeding in order to support more natural feeding behaviour and controlled drinking speed. This can help calves to reach the higher volumes and can also reduce the risk of cross-suckling behaviour.

Portion size

Remember portion sizes, depending on feeding schedule, can be flexible to your unit – meal sizes do not need to be equal and will be influenced by feeding system and frequency.



Peak volumes 3

If calves are easily consuming the allowance, increase volume to satisfy appetite. E.g. move from 8 litres to 9 litres if calves are consuming full volume. Aim to feed at least 20% of bodyweight i.e. 8L for a 40kg calf.

Solid feed 4

Intake of solid feed is not a concern in the first 4 weeks of life. Intakes will accelerate when the gastrointestinal tract is more developed and when the milk allowance is gradually reduced.

Weaning strategy 5

A planned step down followed by a gradual reduction in milk allowance over a period of 3 weeks or more gives calves time to build up solid feed volumes. The aim is to reduce stress and to optimise post weaning performance.