

Calf Weaning Nutrition

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The biggest hurdle in getting calves started off right in the fall is the weather. The sooner you get calves through the stress of weaning and started on feed, the better. If calves get through the stressful process of weaning from their dam and onto feed ahead of fall rains or ice storms, they have a good chance at success.

Good quality grass hay is very palatable and it's a good way to attract bawling calves to the bunk. Don't use a bale ring; this teaches calves NOT to come to the bunk to eat and you'll just need to re-train them to the bunk later. After 1-2 days of free choice feeding long stemmed loose hay in the bunk, limit hay consumption to about 1.0% of bodyweight (5 lb for 500 lb calf) and top-dress 3-5 lb/head (for 500 lb calf) of the weaning ration on top of the hay. As calves consume this small amount of mixed diet, begin to further reduce the amount of loose hay you feed each day and increase the amount of mixed diet.

A mixture of 50% ground hay (grass or grass/alfalfa mix), 50% concentrate (including cracked grain and a starter supplement) can be fairly easy to blend and manage. However, if by-product feeds such as wheat midds, soy hulls, distiller's grains, or corn gluten feed are available and priced at or below the cost of grain on an equal dry matter basis, the by-products can be substituted for about half of the grain component. Silage should be limited to $\leq 10\%$ in the starter ration but can be increased in later step-up diets.

CAUTION: Increase the feed offered per head very gradually. Excessive consumption of even a moderate energy starter diet can cause acidosis in a calf which hasn't been fully adapted to grain. Increase the ration no more than 2 lbs/head every other day. If calves are hungry, feed 1-2 lbs of extra hay in the bunk. If stools become loose, you may have increased the amount of mixed ration too rapidly. If this happens, feed an additional 1-2 lbs/head of hay. Healthy calves should consume about 3% of bodyweight by 14 days on feed. Sick calves may take longer to reach this level of consumption. Gauge any changes you make to feed deliveries on cattle behavior and disease status---slower may be better in the long run.

You want to make the weaning diet as easy of transition for the calves as possible. The diet you feed needs to deliver energy, protein, vitamins, and minerals, all in a form that the calves will readily consume.

Avoid the temptation to skimp on **QUALITY** of starter ingredients; also, avoid the temptation to rush the **QUANTITY** of starter ration you provide for the calves to eat. When calves have consumed 3% of their body weight of the starter ration continuously for 3-5 days, you can move them up to the next step-up ration.