

Nutrition News

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Managing youngstock during winter

With winter fast approaching, it is important to keep your youngstock in mind and consider strategies for reducing the impact of the cold weather.

Cold weather is especially stressful on calves, which can make achieving growth rate targets more difficult this time of year as their bodies work harder to maintain body temperature and use reserves to warm up rather than to grow. Periods of cold can also increase calves' susceptibility to bacterial and viral infections.

Maintaining body temperature

The optimum ambient/environmental temperature range for calves is typically between 15°C and 20°C. This is known as the Thermo Neutral Zone (TNZ). At temperatures in this range, the calf will not have to use any additional energy to maintain its body temperature, leaving plenty of energy available for growth. At 10°C and below, calves will start suffering from cold stress, and use increasing amounts of energy to help maintain a constant body temperature.

Keeping the temperature within the Thermo Neutral Zone is vital to protecting growth rates and health during the winter months, and there are several actions you can take to help your youngstock stay healthy through a cold spell.

Housing

Inside, calves should always have access to dry, deep straw bedding to allow for nesting, which can warm the air around the calf by up to 4°C, and damp bedding should be removed regularly.

Calves are more susceptible to respiratory disease, and pneumonia in particular. Reducing draughts and exposure to cold in calf housing is key to helping prevent pneumonia. At the same time, however, fresh air is needed to kill bugs and bacteria, so while drafts must be prevented, fresh air must be circulating to ensure adequate ventilation.

Calf jackets are a very cost-effective way to maintain body temperature in young calves up to four weeks of age.

In larger sheds, farmers can create a micro-climate for youngstock using straw bales, pallets and sheets of timber. This will help warm the air in a contained area, and help create a draught-free zone.



Nutrition

It is important to ensure that you are feeding youngstock sufficient amounts of concentrate, no matter how tempting it might be to reduce feed rates when costs are high. Calves will require additional feed to help their bodies keep up with demand on temperature regulation, and heifers especially require nutrients to protect future productivity and health of future calves.

In younger calves feeding additional calf milk replacer (CMR) is essential to ensure calves are able to keep themselves warm but also have the energy reserves to maintain strong levels of growth. Failure to increase feed can negatively impact on weight gains, as well as damaging a calf's immune system, leaving them susceptible to illness.

A good rule of thumb is to increase the amount of milk replacer by 2% for every degree the temperature falls below 10°C.

Looking after heifers

Heifers that do not receive adequate nutrition pre-bulling may be left underweight and with low conception rates. Alternatively, if they do conceive, they will likely calve down too light, having a negative effect on that calf's ability and performance later in life.

Pre-calving heifers that are not fed appropriately will produce lower quality colostrum for calves that will be too small and poorly developed. Heifers should be provided with a good quality pre-calving diet six weeks prior to calving.

We're here to help, so for more information on keeping calves healthy this winter and our range of calf feeds, please get in touch with your local Corby Rock Mill sales representative.