

HEALTH & HUSBANDRY

Protect your investment with a scours action plan

by Lacey Fahrmeier, Stillwater Veterinary Clinic



You've likely driven many miles, and spent a great deal of energy and time selecting the perfect sires to

ensure this calf crop will be your best yet. Calving season has always been my favorite time of year. Seeing the plans you made on paper months ago literally come to life makes long days during breeding season and short nights making frigid trips to the calving barn worthwhile.

It is a time of anticipation on a ranch like no other. It's also a time of high anxiety, with the success or failure of the entire year at stake. Watching that long-awaited genetic masterpiece and once-thriving calf fade away before your eyes due to scours has to be one of the most helpless and frustrating experiences you can have as a producer.

Whether you rarely have an issue with scours or battle with it every year, having a scours action plan (SAP) in place will help you minimize disease through prevention and maximize damage control if an outbreak occurs.

Passive transfer

Like so many things in animal health, the disease process that results in a scouring calf is multifactorial, which is what makes it such a complex issue with no silver-bullet solution. Since most of us won't be able to order up perfect calving weather and don't have abundant labor resources or endless acres of fresh Sandhills pasture to calve on, we must take action on the things we can control to improve our odds of weaning a healthy calf.

Your most inexpensive management tool for controlling disease is preventing failure of passive transfer (FPT) of immunity from the cow to the calf. Getting an

adequate amount of quality colostrum in that calf the first eight hours of life is critical. Calves need a minimum of 2 liters (L) of colostrum from their dam, ideally within the first four hours of birth [or 100 grams of immunoglobulin G (IgG) if using a commercial replacement product].

Supplement?

Determining whether you need to supplement colostrum can sometimes be difficult. If you had to pull the calf, it is at a much higher risk for FPT. Since you can never get that precious window of absorption time back, one way to help make the decision about necessity of colostrum supplementation is with a basic vigor assessment within the first 10 minutes of life.

Simply rub the roof of the calf's mouth and evaluate if it has a weak suckle reflex or a strong suckle reflex characterized by strong jaw tone and rhythmic sucking. If it is weak, don't risk FPT; move forward with an action plan to assure the calf gets what it needs. Milking colostrum from the dam and then either bottle- or tube-feeding the calf is best, but might not be practical.

Having a frozen bank of colostrum in 1-L bags is also a good option. The ideal donor cow is one from your own herd that is healthy and 3-6 years old. Remember to thaw it slowly in a warm-water bath. Do not microwave, as doing so denatures the proteins.

Never resort to use of colostrum from a dairy. The risk of introducing pathogens such as Johne's disease and bovine leukosis virus (BLV) is too high. Also, quality is reduced because of dilution due to the volume a dairy cow produces.

A hygiene tip that will decrease the spread of disease is to use separate esophageal feeder tubes and bottles for colostrum vs.

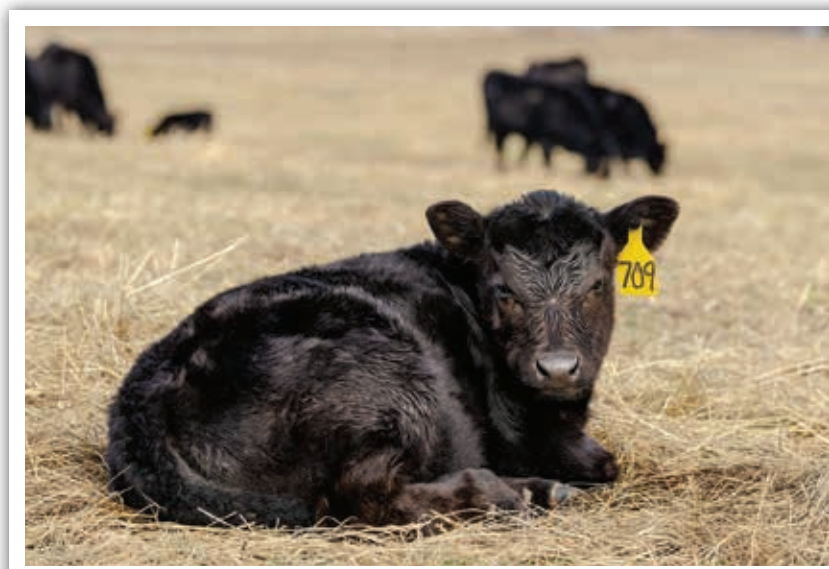


PHOTO BY SHAUNA HERMEL

Since older calves shed pathogens that might cause infection in younger ones, it is a good idea to keep them segregated by age. Try to pasture together calves that were born in no more than a three- to four-week window.

electrolyte administration. The last thing you want to do is inadvertently infect a newborn by using the same tube you just used on a sick calf.

Vaccination

Another tool for boosting the quality of a cow's colostrum and preventing calf scours is through the use of a scour vaccine. I like to think of scour vaccine as an insurance policy. Hopefully they are unnecessary, but if disease exposure or weather conditions are especially challenging, they can be very valuable. Scour vaccine is especially helpful to bred heifers that typically produce lower-quality colostrum than mature cows.

Remember to plan well in advance. To maximize effectiveness, bred heifers must receive two doses, with the first given three months prior to calving and a booster three to six weeks following the initial dose.

Management

Scour vaccine is a tool to help reduce the likelihood of scours, but it will not fix poor management or calving conditions. Sanitation is also huge for minimizing pathogen load.

Spread cattle out as much as possible to reduce exposure to mud and manure.

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Not death sentence

If you do find yourself in the midst of a scours outbreak, consult your veterinarian for the appropriate diagnostic testing needed to determine the culprit and how to best intervene.

Scours doesn't have to be a death sentence. With a rather minimal investment of time and treatment cost, the vast majority of scouring calves will bounce back if they are caught early, monitored closely and given an appropriate treatment plan. |

Editor's note: "Health & Husbandry" is a regular column in the *Angus Beef Bulletin* devoted to the care and well-being of the herd. Since starting this column, author Lacey (Robinson) Fahrmeier has moved from her position at Kansas State University into private practice, joining the team at Stillwater Veterinary Clinic in Absarokee, Mont.