



## CARING FOR THE ORPHANED OR ABANDONED CALF

**For one reason or another, a calf may become abandoned at birth. Inexperience, illness or age may have prevented the mother from being able to sustain her calf, or worse, she may have experienced birthing difficulties to which she succumbed. The care of the calf therefore becomes the responsibility of a human surrogate who will have to take on the tasks of providing daily care.**

### CARE OF THE NAVEL

The navel or umbilical cord of the newborn calf offers a route into the bloodstream for bacteria that can cause severe or fatal septicemia. This route may also introduce other bacteria which cause a condition leading to serious arthritic problems.

It is important, then, to dip or swab the navel of the newborn with a 2% tincture of iodine or other similar topical disinfectant, and to observe the navel at regular intervals over several days to ensure it dries and heals without infection.

### FEEDING

Feeding a calf can be a challenging but satisfying experience. Hopefully, an abandoned calf would have had its first drink of colostrum from its mother, but often this is never the case.

Colostrum is the first milk from the mother immediately after calving. It is rich in antibodies which give the newborn calf resistance to diseases. It is also higher in total solids and protein than normal milk. Colostrum may be sought from another cow that had given birth recently, but the calf's ability to absorb colostral antibodies decreases rapidly, rendering it almost unable to benefit in as little as 24 hours after birth.

Whole milk becomes the next viable option. Milk replacers may be purchased from some dealers. Care must be taken not to overfeed calves, especially during the first 3 weeks of life. Feeding twice a day is satisfactory, with half the

required amount being fed at each feeding. The actual temperature of the milk is not important but it should be kept at a constant temperature throughout the feeding program.

### METHODS OF FEEDING

Naturally, a caregiver will tend to begin feeding a calf via a nipple feeder (simple bottle and nipple). This ensures that the calf obtains milk in similar fashion to suckling from its mother. It is usually easy to nipple feed because the sucking reflex of newborns does not have to be taught.

A calf can be trained, however, to drink milk from a bucket. Simply back the animal into a corner, stand beside or astride its neck and place two moistened (with milk) fingers into its mouth. As the calf starts to suck, gently lower its mouth into a bucket of warm milk, ensuring that its nostrils stay clear of the liquid. This may have to be repeated several times before the calf will drink unaided.

### WATER

Calves will begin to drink water when they are about a week old. Milk feeding does not supply enough water for the calf. Fresh, cool water should always be made available.

### SOILD FEEDS – GRASS AND PELLETS

Milk is a highly digestible energy source with the correct balance of protein, vitamins, and minerals required for the first weeks of life. To ensure continued normal growth, this balance must be maintained during weaning from milk

and the transition to solid feed. Concentrates or pellets can be introduced by placing a small amount in the milking bucket. As the calf finishes drinking you can rub a little on its muzzle to encourage the calf to taste it. By three weeks old it should be able to digest small amounts of concentrates, and should be given access to young green pasture.

At this age the calf is unable to consume and digest the volume of green feed required to support rapid growth, but green pasture in conjunction with milk replacer will be adequate to maintain liveweight increase.

## **WEANING**

Calves may be successfully weaned from milk or milk replacers at 3-6 weeks of age depending on breed and appetite. Orphans may not be vigorous enough to be weaned quite so early, and may be given an extra 2-3 weeks on a milk diet.

Once the calf is eating well, milk should be gradually withdrawn. This may be done over a one-week period. It is important that green hay or grass is fed as this encourages the development of the rumen, which ensures that the calf is well on its way to surviving on its own.

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