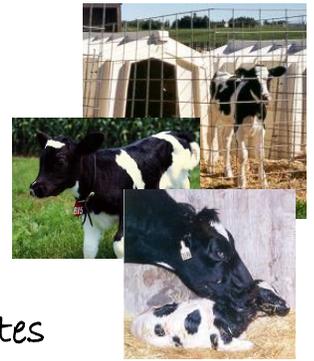


Calving Ease

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Biosecurity for Calves: 5 Ways to Improve

- No. 1 Buy separate boots for the calf facility.
- No. 2 Make it easy and convenient to wear disposable gloves.
- No. 3 Bleach everything.
- No. 4 Segregate sick calves where possible.
- No. 5 Restrict visitor access.

Buy separate boots for calf facility.

Many of us that provide calf care also work with either cows or older heifers or both. I am guilty of doing a sloppy job of hosing off my boots when going from cows to calves. Or, worse, in the rush of activities not paying any attention to manure contaminated boots – right from the cow barn to calves. With some preparation and thought, it is possible to break the connection between the calving and calf pens.

Remember that the most highly contaminated cow manure we encounter daily is from cows in our calving pens. With their immune systems compromised at calving these cows produce many pathogens that put our newborn calves at risk.

“But, we have a boot bath.” Research completed as part of a salmonella outbreak investigation demonstrated the ineffectiveness of boot baths for limiting pathogen transmission at calf facilities. After only a few uses the boot baths became so intensely contaminated that they acted to increase pathogen transmission.

A number of dairies have adopted the practice of leaving contaminated boots at the calf barn door and slipping into boots dedicated to the calf facility.

Make it easy and convenient to wear disposable gloves.

Unfortunately, our hands serve as an effective means of transmitting bacteria, viruses and even parasites. As I reflect on some of my practices from the 1980’s I shudder.

But, what can we do better? We can make it easy to wear and dispose of gloves. One of my clients has boxes of gloves in the Gator, in the trucks, in the utility room along with trash bags posted in convenient

spots to toss out used gloves. Yes, where there are multiple persons feeding and caring for calves it is important to have more than one size of gloves available.

It is especially important to change gloves when treating multiple sick calves.

Bleach everything!

It is easy to neglect sanitizing equipment before using it when we know it is “clean.” The equation “sanitizing = sterilizing” is not true. Even when we do a good job of “cleaning” equipment (for example, tube feeder) it is far from sterile. And, a tube feeder hangs up to dry in a cow or calf barn it is continuously showered with airborne pathogens. Thus, an inexpensive step to improve biosecurity is the liberal use of bleach solutions. For example, fill tube feeder with strong bleach solution and let it run out through the tube just before filling it with warm colostrum.

Several of my clients that bucket feed milk also bottle feed the youngest calves. They carry a pail of warm strong bleach solution at feeding time – their routine is “feed a bottle, toss used nipple into bleach bucket, replace it with a fresh nipple out of bleach bucket before feeding the next calf.”

Segregate sick calves where possible.

In instances especially where the pathogen has been identified as mycoplasma or Salmonella Dublin the urgency for biosecurity may be urgent enough to justify segregating sick calves – yes, physically isolating these calves. One of my clients has a “hospital” section of the calf hutches that are set twice as far apart as normal in a section set off to one side. They are fed after all the other calves are cared for – the milk cart and care giver go back to the utility room to clean up after being exposed to these sick calves. And, when sick calves are treated these calves are cared for last.

When it is not practical to segregate sick calves think about ways to restrict carrying bacteria/viruses from sick to healthy calves. Mark pens or hutches clearly as off limits for regular calf care activities – feed separately, treat separately, take special care to clean hands, boots, and clothing before going on to work with healthy calves.

Restrict visitor access

Forget the usual definition of “visitor.” The most significant biosecurity threat probably comes from home-farm employees that work with cows. These “visitors” may come to help move calves, deliver newborn calves, and help with routine chores like cleaning pens/hutches. Having a conveniently located non-freezing location with running water, a drain and a long-handled boot brush can help neutralize this threat.

When professional veterinary assistance is needed think about the sequence of on-farm activities of the veterinarian. Let us be proactive. Tell your veterinarian that you prefer they work with the calves BEFORE going on to work with the adult dairy herd.

Our thanks to Attica Veterinary Associates, P.C. for their support for this issue. Visit their web site, www.atticacows.com for more information. Calf resources featured are Calf Facts Resource Library (www.calffacts.com), Calf Management Newsletter, and “Calves with Sam” blog.