

Calving Ease

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Getting Better Calf Starter Intake

- **Begin with a calf starter grain that calves want to eat.**
- **Offer only a handful of grain to youngest calves until they begin to eat it.**
- **Change grain frequently for youngest calves – mid-day gets them up.**
- **Usually, the higher the volume of milk offered, the later calves will begin to eat calf starter – even at late as three weeks of age.**
- **At least once a week, dump all the grain buckets and start over – especially important in hot and damp weather.**
- **If facilities permit, separate grain and water pails to reduce “slopping” water into grain pails.**
- **Clean free-choice water is necessary for good calf starter intake.**

Begin with calf starter grain that calves want to eat.

Depending on where your dairy is located in the nation there will be different feeds available at differing prices. That will partially determine your possible ingredients. In addition, traditions vary from one region to another – for example, while cottonseed hulls might make an economical feed in the southeastern United States, a mix of roasted soybeans, corn and oats with a pellet may be attractive in the northeastern state. Some may choose to substitute canola for soybean meal.

The bottom line is the attractiveness for the calf – palatability always wins.

Offer only a handful of grain to youngest calves until they begin to eat it.

Some calf facilities offer a handful of starter in a shallow pan or pail to their youngest calves. Others use a pail (anywhere from 5 to 10-quart capacity) with a handful in the bottom. Calf folklore (we all know about this) has it that calves are more likely to experiment pushing this around with their nose compared to grain in a half-full pail.

Changing grain frequently for youngest calves may encourage them to try it.

Both Kazzie and Sam change out the grain daily for youngest calves until they began to eat some. Since this is only a handful for each calf this does not require a lot of labor and very little starter (it can be fed to older calves). Neither of us has ever cared for 5,000 or even 1,000 calves on milk so we are not sure how practical this advice is for that scale. When this visit can be timed in the middle of the day, it often

gets the calves up and interested in what is going on. And, this provides one extra observation of the most vulnerable calves – less than two weeks old.

Calves usually begin to eat starter later when offered high volumes of milk.

When calves are on an intensive milk feeding program it is common for them to begin eating calf starter at an older age than when calves are offered only four quarts of milk a day.

At Least Once a Week Dump all the Pails and Start Over

Let us assume you are not practicing the “dark-ages” method of filling the grain pail $\frac{1}{2}$ - $\frac{2}{3}$ full when the calf goes into the hutch. That old-fashioned practice certainly saved labor and, unfortunately, effectively suppressed early calf starter grain consumption.

Nevertheless, why dump and start over? Well, consider the ideal practice is to feed just a bit more grain than the calf will clean up each day. If the calf cleans up her grain today, then I need to feed more the next day so she does not run out. However, it is not easy to out-guess calves. It is almost inevitable that, for at least a third or even half the calves, the grain will build up in the bucket if it is never dumped. During many months during warm weather, it is common for grain left in a calf bucket to develop a “musty” or “moldy” odor. We may not smell it but the calves will. And, they will avoid that smell.

If facilities permit, separate grain and water pails to reduce “slopping” water into grain pails.



Notice how easily the calf in the left-hand image can slop water between the red pails. In contrast, the calf drinking from the water pail (right hand image with white pails) has significantly less opportunity for water transfer.

Clean free-choice water is necessary for good calf starter intake.

Our rule of thumb for water:grain intake is four pounds of water for each pound of grain. This is for optimal grain consumption. As we limit water, we limit grain intake.

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