

Preventing the Spread of Mycoplasma Infections Among Calves

Low levels of the Mycoplasma organism are present in nearly every dairy herd. In calves, it is possible to culture some Mycoplasma from between 20 and 30 percent of their airways.

Infections occur when calves are exposed to so many Mycoplasma pathogens that their immune defenses are overwhelmed. Here are three rules to reduce exposure:

- **Isolate all calves suspected of a Mycoplasma infection.** Distance is our friend in slowing calf-to-calf transmission. A separate section of hutches or isolated barn is ideal. Isolation prevents calf-to-calf contact. It also reduces the chances of us, the caretakers, carrying the pathogen from infected to non-infected calves as we feed, bed and treat them.
- **Leave the housing empty for as long as possible.** Mycoplasma organisms are hard to kill. In liquid, they can survive as long as six months. Moisture is Mycoplasma's friend. Where conditions are warm and dry Mycoplasma can survive up to four months. In cold, dry weather it is estimated that the organism probably dies within one month. The ideal control, therefore, is time.

If time is not available, power washing at high temperature will kill the organism. This is a practical alternative for hutches. However, in a partially-occupied calf barn, power washing is very likely to spread Mycoplasma to many other calves.

- **In barns, maintain an adequate volume of air exchange during all seasons.** We are almost certain to have some Mycoplasma organisms discharged by non-infected carrier calves. When the concentration of Mycoplasma gets high enough, calves with low immune defenses will develop the disease. The rule is ventilate, ventilate, ventilate. Lots of fresh air dilutes the airborne pathogen load and helps prevent all respiratory illnesses.

For more background information from a Virginia Tech resource go to :

<http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/404/404-038/404-038.html>

Scroll down past mastitis to the section on calves.

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