

## Weaning Calves

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As spring beef calves are beginning to be weaned, it is the producer's responsibility to help make that transition as smooth as possible. Improper weaning can result in poor growth, which may stay with the animal through its life.

The weaning process can be broken into three stresses the calf is dealing with. The first and most obvious is maternal separation; the second is moving to a new environment and social structure; the third is the need for a calf to become accustomed to new and unfamiliar feedstuffs as it's transitioned from a diet of grass and milk to a total mix ration or starter pellet in a different environment.

Here are some tips to help ease the transition.

Many calves are raised in a grassland environment. Getting them adjusted to a feed bunk is one of the most important things a producer can do in the weaning process. If they do not eat properly there's an increased risk of disease. Feeding both cows and calves a small amount of a supplement or the weaning ration out of a bunk prior to weaning when the calves are with the cows can be a good way to acclimate them to those feeds. The cows may consume most of the feed, but the calves are up there getting exposed to the bunk.

A study at the K-State Agricultural Research Center at Hays showed that where calves had exposure to a feed bunk, either through a dry lot or pasture method, a higher percentage of them approached and ate from the bunk in the critical first week of weaning than calves that had never been exposed to a feed bunk before. This is especially important as newly-weaned calves are brought into a typical feedlot environment or even a set of pens. Just that adjustment can help in making that successful transition from being at their mother's side to being in a different environment.

Utilizing a feed management protocol that transitions the calves from a grass and milk diet to some sort of a total mix ration. Weanlings are often used to feedstuffs such as grass and hay, which are not rich in nutrients, so producers must find a way to balance the familiar feedstuff with new, nutrient-rich feeds.

The dry matter intake on calves is often about 1 percent of body weight. A study at the K-State Agricultural Research Center at Hays suggests that producers offer the calf 0.5 percent of its body weight of concentrate-based 75 to 85 percent total digestible nutrients or TDN ration. Try to limit silage and other familiar feeds. So, the calf is offered half of 1.0 or 0.5 percent of body weight of a weaning ration or pellet and half of 1 percent of body weight of good quality grass hay.

Positioning the feed is as important as the feed itself. Put the hay the calves are most familiar with on top of the feed ration on the first day. The second day the ration should be increased to around 0.7 percent of the body weight and keep the hay the same. Put the hay on top of the ration. On the third or fourth day, increase the amount of feed, but not the hay. At this time, put the ration on top of the hay. Days seven through 10 of weaning, the goal is to have a calf eating 2 percent to 2.2 percent of its body weight – maybe even 2.5 percent.

With this method you are balancing the need to transition the calves and ensure they have enough nutrition. Often weanling calves are fed as much as they will eat which can lead to problems later. It is important to keep the calves eating because there are many times where we create more problems for ourselves in a weaning program by getting ahead of the calves and offering them too much feed. The calves eat really strong one day and then the next day they back off and the intakes go up and down.

Make sure calves are effectively prepared for the weaning transition. Adequately preparing them to make that transition should pay back in terms of health and the ultimate lifetime performance of that calf as it moves to the next phase of the production cycle.

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