



Caring for calves

A guide to creating procedures for calf care



Caring for calves from paddock to pen

This resource has been developed for all staff involved in the care of calves from the paddock through the first few days of a calf's life. By following some simple processes from birth, you can make sure that every calf has the best possible start to life.

Calves that are cared for well:

- have a reduced risk of disease and cost less to rear
- grow faster and go on to be stronger well grown replacements that will continue to develop into valuable, productive adults or that will be fit and strong enough to be transported at four days of age as bobby calves
- make the whole farm team's life easier, more rewarding and are something to be proud of.

Use this resource with your team so everyone knows what, why, and how things are done when it comes to looking after calves on your farm.

How to use this resource

Use as a training tool to provide background information on what should be done and why (policy). Make time ahead of calving and work through the relevant sections. Taking the time with your farm team to explain the reasons behind why you operate in a certain way will help your team appreciate the reasons for farm procedures, the consequences of not following procedures, and will reinforce the importance of the part that they have to play within the farm team.



Complete the templates to provide tailored instructions that remind the team how things are done on your farm (procedures). Having completed the templates, put them in the area where the process is being carried out as a handy reminder.

What is covered?

- Health and safety.
- Recording births.
- Care of newborn calves in the paddock.
- Transport of calves from the paddock.
- Colostrum management.
- Health and hygiene in the calf shed.
- Tagging techniques.
- Selecting calves for transport.



The cow and its calf



Safety around newly calved cows

- Cows can be very protective of their calf and see people as a threat.
- Cows that are usually calm can become unpredictable after calving.
- Always keep an eye on the cow and keep the calf between you and its mother.
- Make sure you have an escape route planned in case you need to get out of the way of a protective mother.

Calving kits

A well-stocked calving kit will save you making trips between the paddock and the shed.

Checking new-born calves

Mothers and calves often get separated in the calving paddock and calves can hide in drains, hollows, hedges, and long grass, or they may walk under break fences, so it is important to take your time checking the paddock. In cold, wet and windy weather calves will tend to walk in the direction of the wind.

First check:

- Is the calf alive?
- Is the calf breathing?
- Is the calf's chest rising and falling?
- Is mucous bubbling around the calf's nose?

If you don't think the calf is breathing:

- clear the calf's nose and mouth of any mucous
- roughly rub the chest and sides of the calf with a towel or handful of hay or grass
- tickle the calf's nostril with straw or grass to get it to sneeze.

If the calf is alive and breathing, check to see if it is fit and healthy:

- Any injuries?
- Any deformities?

Spray the calf's navel in the paddock to help prevent infection.

Identifying calves

Recording information about the cow and calf is important for farm records. Identifying calves in the paddock prevents confusion at the calf shed and helps track the age of calves.



Our farm procedure

The cow and its calf



Safety around newly calved cows

Stay safe around newly calved cows - be aware of the cows around you.

Keep the calf between you and its mother

Calving kits

We keep our calving kits here _____

It's everyone's job to make sure the calving kit is restocked.

Checking new-born calves

Check all areas of the paddock carefully for calves.

Check that newborn calves are breathing, healthy, and normal.

If a calf needs urgent care _____

Treat navels with iodine as soon after birth as possible and before transporting calves to the shed.

Identifying calves

How we identify calves:

Bobbies: _____

Heifer calves: _____

Other: _____

Recording births

Record the following for each calf:

- Date of birth.
- Sex of the calf.
- Mother's tag number.
- _____
- Calf identity/number.
- If the calf is alive or dead.
- If the calving was assisted or unassisted.
- _____

We record the information here _____

Add these numbers to your phone in case there are any problems:

Manager:

Vet:

Transport to the shed



Safe lifting

- Newborn calves can be heavy, wet, and awkward to hold.
- Make sure you handle and lift calves correctly to help prevent injuries to both you and the calves.
- Calves can be injured easily so care must be taken when placing them in transport.

Using the calf trailer

- There should be enough room so all calves in the trailer can lie down comfortably.
- Overloading the trailer can lead to injuries and swollen navels.
- Driving slowly helps keep you and the calves safe. Care must be taken when driving on slopes because the trailer can become unstable.
- Slow driving also allows any newly calved cows to follow the trailer.

Cleaning the calf trailer

- Applying an easy-clean, non-slip material to the bottom of the trailer can help make transportation safer and more comfortable for calves.
- Regular cleaning and disinfection of the trailer reduces the risk of infections.
- Allowing the trailer to dry in the sun also helps kill bacteria.



Our farm procedure

Transport to the shed



Handling calves

Handle calves with care:

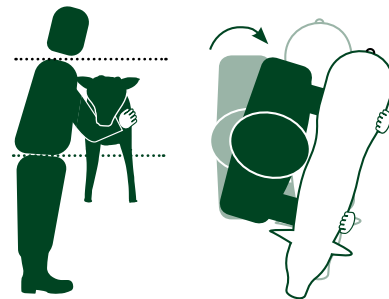
If you need to lift a calf:

1. protect your back, bend your knees and keep your back straight
2. keep the calf in close with one arm around its chest and the other either just in front of or around its back legs
3. look straight ahead and straighten your legs.



If you have to carry a calf a short distance:

- hold the calf close to your body and carry it between waist and shoulder height.



If you need to turn:

- move your feet and don't twist at the waist.

Ask for help to lift heavy calves.

Collecting calves

We collect calves _____ times per day at _____

We carry a maximum of _____ calves in our trailer.

If there are more calves than this, we make two trips. Bring at risk calves to the calf shed on the first trip.

The farm speed limit in the paddock is _____ and on the raceways is _____

We place _____ on the bottom of our trailer to give calves a non-slip surface.

We keep our trailer clean by _____

We disinfect our trailer _____ times per week with _____

Add these numbers to your phone in case there are any problems:

Manager:

Vet:

Colostrum management



Colostrum is essential for all calves

Newborn calves need enough colostrum, as soon as possible, to absorb the antibodies that protect them from disease.

Follow the 5 Qs to ensure calves get the best start to life:



1 Quality

Colostrum should be harvested as soon as possible after a cow has calved. Brix refractometers can be used to measure the antibody level in colostrum. Colostrum that measures 22% or more is considered high quality. For the best results, the highest quality colostrum you have available, should be fed to newborns.

2 Quickly

Feed calves as soon as you can and within 6-12 hours as they can only absorb antibodies for a short time after birth. Calves can no longer absorb antibodies from around 24 hours after birth.

3 Quantity

Calves should receive at least 10% of their body weight in colostrum within the first 12 hours of life.

For example, calves born weighing between 25kg - 40 kg will need 2.5l – 4l in their first 12 hours, split across at least two feeds. Avoid feeding more than 2–3 litres in one feed and leave at least two hours between feeds. An additional feed of 2 litres of good quality, fresh colostrum in the next 12 hours is beneficial.

4 sQueaky clean

Make sure the colostrum is collected hygienically into clean collection containers. If storing colostrum, refrigerate or freeze quickly and avoid pooling from different cows.

5 Quantify

Establish a system for reviewing how effective colostrum management is on your farm. Work with your veterinarian to carry out testing to determine antibody uptake in calves and identify any failure of passive transfer FPT.

Brix Testing

- Use a Brix refractometer to check the quality of colostrum (quality cannot be checked by eye)
- Mix the colostrum sample well before taking a single drop for testing.
- Colostrum measuring 22% Brix or higher is considered good quality and should be prioritised for newborn calves. If the colostrum sample has a value below 20% it is poor quality. Do not feed it to calves during their first 24 hours of life - save it for calves that are at least 2 - 3 days old.
- Remember - newborn calves should be given the freshest, highest quality colostrum. Older calves can be given lower quality colostrum.



Our farm procedure

Colostrum management

Colostrum is essential for every calf - Follow the **5 Qs** to give calves the best start.
Feed the highest quality colostrum available as soon as possible after birth.



The 5 Qs:

1 Quality

- Collect colostrum cleanly and as soon as possible after calving.
- Test every batch using a Brix refractometer before deciding to feed to newborns, store or feed to older calves.

2 Quickly

- Feed calves as soon as possible after birth – ideally within 6-12 hours of birth.

3 Quantity

- Feed a minimum of 10% of a calf's body weight in colostrum.

4 sQueaky Clean

- Collect colostrum hygienically into clean containers.
- preservative, refrigerate or freeze quickly if storing.

5 Quantify

- Regularly review colostrum quality and calf immunity.

Brix Testing – Quick Guide

22% Brix = Good quality (high antibodies)

- Feed to newborn calves within 6-12 hours.

Below 20% Brix = Poor quality

- Do not feed to calves in their first 24 hours, feed to calves at 2–3 days of age.

Farm Colostrum Protocol

Our minimum Brix target is _____%.

We feed first colostrum within _____ hours of birth.

We feed _____ litres at first feed.

We store colostrum by _____

We review colostrum management with our vet by: _____

The calf shed



Hygiene and biosecurity

Good biosecurity practices can help keep calves and the farm team healthy.

Wash your hands with soap and warm water regularly, especially before eating, drinking or smoking.

Have a separate pair of farm clothing and boots to use around calves. Clean these regularly.

Prevent visitors from entering the shed - the more people that come through the shed, the higher the risk of spreading disease.

Avoid moving calves between pens to limit the spread of disease.

Bedding must be comfortable, clean, and dry.

Regularly using a disinfectant to clean pens helps reduce build-up of harmful bugs.

Keep feeders and other calf equipment clean.

Bobby calf transporters have a high risk of spreading disease. Since transporters can carry diseases from other farms, our bobby calf area could be at risk. Feeding bobby calves once all other calves have been fed can reduce the chance of spreading bugs to our other calves.



General health

Daily health checks help you identify and treat any issues early.

From a distance, check are there any calves:

- isolated from the group
- that aren't interested in feeding
- behaving differently to the group.

When you are near the calves, check them over while they are feeding:

- treat navels with iodine to reduce the risk of infection and dry the navel quicker
- feel for abnormal/swollen navels regularly
- look for scours or dirty bums
- look for any with dull or sunken eyes, or walking unsteadily
- look for any not feeding as enthusiastically as the others.

For more information visit dairynz.co.nz/calves.

Our farm procedure

The calf shed

Hygiene

Wash your hands with soap and warm water regularly.

Ask before you move calves between pens.

Top bedding up if you see concrete, bare earth, or mud.

We disinfect our calf pens _____ times per week with _____

We clean feeding equipment ____ times per week and clean them using _____

General health

Check calves daily to make sure they are healthy.

Healthy calves	Unhealthy calves
Alert and active: will take notice of you and play with other calves	Slow and disinterested: will lie down a lot more than other calves
Can stand and walk evenly on all four feet	Will not stand or will limp when walking
Upright ears and bright eyes	Droopy ears and dull eyes
Have a shiny, clean coat	Have a dull coat
Have a dry, withered navel	Have a wet, swollen navel
Have a good appetite	Are not interested in feeding
Have yellow, sticky poo	Have watery, smelly poo
Have tails that wag during feeding	Drink without enthusiasm
Clear nose, steady breathing	Runny nose, fast or rattly breathing

Managing sick calves

If you see any sick calves _____

Treating navels

We treat navels by _____

Add these numbers to your phone in case there are any problems:

Manager:

Vet:

Tagging calves

Ear tagging and avoiding infection

Ear tags allow us to identify and track calves.

By understanding how to correctly tag calves, we can keep calves calm and do the job well.

Before starting, check to make sure the tagging equipment is working.

Once the tagger is loaded, make sure the male and female parts of the tag line up correctly.

To reduce the risk of infection, dunk the tag and end of the tagger in antiseptic, and remove any hay or shavings from the ear.

Hold the calf between your legs with its back end in a solid corner of the calf pen to maintain good control.

Place the tag as shown in the diagram, between the two thickened lines of cartilage. Once in place, squeeze the tagger quickly and firmly. You should feel a strong click when the tag snaps together. Remove the tagger and check to make sure the tag is closed and will hold.



Our farm procedure

Tagging calves

How we tag calves:

Bobbies: _____

Heifer calves: _____

Other: _____

Clean the tagger regularly to prevent infections.

After each calf has been tagged, check to make sure the tag has correctly locked together.

Check recently tagged calves for any signs of infection. An infected ear will show redness or swelling around the ear tag. _____

If you see an infected ear _____



Add these numbers to your phone in case there are any problems:

Manager:

Vet:

Fit for Transport - calf selection

At least 4 days old

- Calves must be at least 4 full days old before pick-up.



Correct ear tag

- Tags help identify our calves when they're taken to the works.



Standing and walking

- Calves must be able to stand and walk.
- Lame calves must not be transported.



Firm, worn hooves

- When calves are born their hooves are soft and rounded. Over time they become worn.
- This is a sign that calves are old enough for transport.



Full tummy

- Calves must be fed before pick-up.



No scours

- Calves must be healthy and free of disease.



Ears up, eyes bright

- Calves must be bright eyed, alert, and active.
- Dull eyes mean a calf is unwell.



Dry navel

- When calves are born their navels are pink and wet but overtime they become dry and wrinkled. This is a sign that calves are old enough to be transported.



Our farm procedure

Fit for transport - calf selection

We communicate with our transporter to agree on where bobby calves selected for transport are held.

We make sure bobby calves are correctly tagged by _____


We make sure bobby calves are 4 days old by _____


We make sure bobby calves get fed before pick-up by _____


Our fit for transport check includes: _____


Fit for transport


Tick all 8 to leave the gate


4 days old



Ears up and eyes bright



Correct eartag



Dry navel




No scours


Firm, worn hooves


Standing and walking


Full tummy - no antibiotic milk


Add these numbers to your phone in case there are any problems:

Manager:

Vet:



Check out our caring for calves videos
and resources, visit dairynz.co.nz/calves

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