

Weaning methods for suckled calves

Weaning can be a stressful time for calves as they can experience changes in diet, new social environments, loss of maternal contact and in many cases, new housing. Producers can take a number of steps to reduce the stress at weaning, therefore, minimising any drop in performance or health problems around that time.

A study conducted in Uruguay aimed to compare the impact of three different weaning methods on calf behaviour and performance.

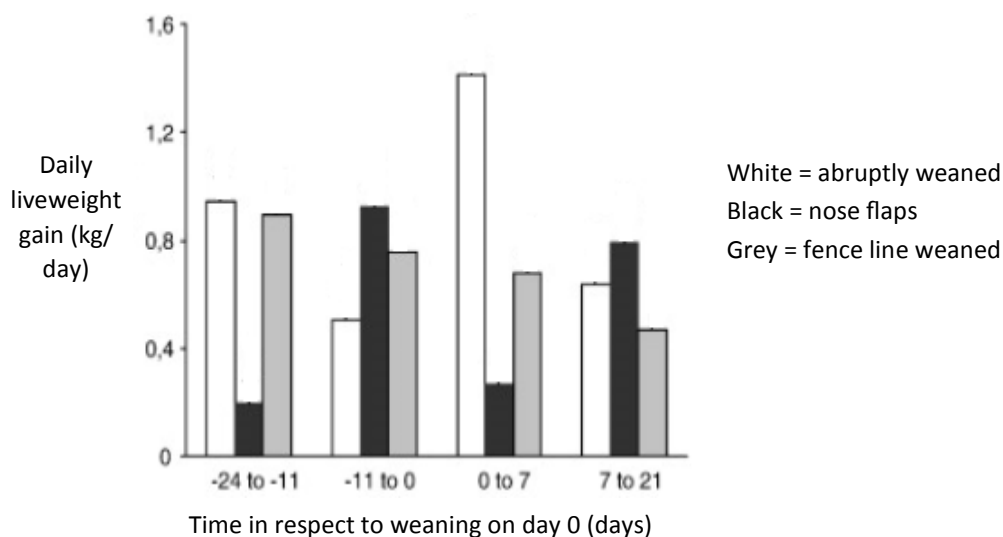
The three weaning methods compared included:

- Abruptly weaned
- Fence line separation followed by final separation 17 days later
- Nose flaps followed by final separation 17 days later



The study found that daily liveweight gain (DLWG) during the weaning period was greatest when calves were abruptly weaned, followed by fence line and then nose flap weaning (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Performance of calves abruptly weaned, separated by a fence line from their mothers 17 days before weaning or fitted with a nose flap 17 days before weaning.



Results

Even though distress behaviours, including vocalising and pacing, had the greatest peaks after abrupt weaning, it seems that fence line and nose flap weaning distributed the distress response over a longer time period resulting in poorer performance.

Fence-line-weaned calves spent 65% of their time pacing and vocalising very close to the fence separating them from their mothers. Although the highest rates of these behaviours occurred during the first two days after fence line separation, they continued exhibiting this behaviour for 13 days. This indicates that being physically separated whilst still being able to see and hear the dam is a major source of stress for the calves.

As well as exhibiting vocalisation and pacing behaviours, calves weaned using the nose flaps attempted to suckle their mothers repeatedly over the first three days of them being fitted. Once the cows and calves were completely separated, 17 days after the nose flaps were fitted, there was an increase in vocalisations, seeking and pacing behaviours and a loss of DLWG. This suggests that both the loss of the dam, as well as the loss of milk supply is a cause of stress at weaning time.

Recommendations

Whatever method of weaning is chosen, it is important that calves are at least five months of age. Feeding a creep feed prior to weaning can help acclimatise calves to their ration post-weaning and reduce any associated growth check. If creep-fed calves are being sold around weaning, it is useful to tell the buyers what they have been fed so they can feed a similar concentrate post-sale.

Top tips for weaning suckled calves:

- Introduce concentrates to calves at grass at least one month prior to weaning and feed the same concentrates after weaning
- Wean calves in good weather and remove the cows from the calves. If possible, remove up to a third of the cows at a time, leaving a few days between removing each batch. The cows should be moved out of sight and sound of the remaining group
- Do not house and wean calves at the same time, minimise the number of stressors calves are exposed to at any one time
- If housing calves at weaning, keep stocking rates as low as possible, provide lots of clean bedding and ensure the shed is well ventilated
- Vaccinate all calves for pneumonia, ensuring both doses are given two weeks before weaning
- Wait at least two weeks after weaning before selling calves

For further information, see the BRP manual
[Feeding Suckler Cows and Calves for Better Returns](#)

Reference:

Enríquez, D.H., Ungerfeld, R., Quintans, G., Guidoni, A.L. and Hötzel, M.J., 2010. The effects of alternative weaning methods on behaviour in beef calves. *Livestock Science*, 128(1), pp.20-27.