

Creep feeding spring-born suckled calves

Rhidian Jones, SAC Consulting

Why creep feed?

By the time a calf is four months old, half of its feed requirement should be met by grass, silage or concentrates rather than milk. At this stage a calf will convert feed to liveweight more efficiently than at any other time in its life, so creep feeding to maximise weaning weights will be very cost effective.

Feeding creep at this stage of life is particularly efficient as the rest of the calf's diet (ie milk and forage) already more than meets the requirement for maintenance, so all the nutrients from the creep are used for growth. It can increase weaning weights by around 25kg and offers an efficient feed conversion ratio, as 4kg of creep can provide 1kg in liveweight gain.



While creep feeding is important for calves moving on to intensive finishing systems, even cattle kept for later finishing or as replacements will benefit. Extra weight at weaning should be maintained through to turnout and eventual sale, with savings in feed and other finishing costs. Replacement heifers due to calve down at two years old also benefit, because they are more likely to meet the required growth targets.

Weaning is a stressful time for the suckled calf, as not only does it lose the comfort of being with its mother, but it also loses milk as a source of nutrients. Supplying creep feed before weaning can help smooth the transition from pre- to post-weaning, and the extra source of nutrients can compensate for the reduction in milk yield as lactation progresses. The weaning check is reduced because the calf is already familiar with concentrate feed and the rumen microbes are adapted for a change of diet.

When there is less stress at weaning there is a reduced incidence of pneumonia. The fact the calves are larger also means they will be less prone to diseases.

When to start creep feeding

Timing when to introduce creep feed will depend on calf age, growth potential of calves and grass availability. Normally creep feeding would start six to 10 weeks prior to weaning, but bulls to be finished on ad-lib cereal diets should start being creep fed earlier, at around 12 weeks before weaning. With very milky cows, or in situations where it is tricky to creep feed, starting four to six weeks before weaning will still help reduce the weaning check. As a rough guide, allow 100-150kg of creep feed per calf for a six to 12 week creep feeding period.

If suckler cows are in poorer condition than normal this may limit milk production, so creep feeding will improve calf performance and take pressure off the mothers. If grass supplies are limited then creep feeding will also improve the performance of the calves.