

Creep feeding

By the time a calf is four months of age, half its feed requirements 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.

Creep feeding can have a number of benefits including:

- ⇒ Weaning weights can be increased by 25kg
- ⇒ Reducing the weaning check due to less stress, as it familiarises the calves to a different feed
- ⇒ Reduced pneumonia after housing
- ⇒ Efficient feed conversion ratio – 4kg creep can provide 1kg gain.

While creep feeding is important for calves moving onto intensive finishing systems, even cattle kept for later finishing or as replacements will benefit from a reduced weaning check and lowered risk of pneumonia after housing.

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 will also benefit because they are more likely to meet the growth targets required for successful calving.

When to start creep feeding



Timing will depend on calf age, their growth potential and grass availability. Normally, creep feeding would start six to ten weeks prior to weaning, but bulls to be finished on *ad libitum* (*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.

Composition of creep feeds

Creep feeds should be palatable and kept fresh. Composition should be around 14 to 16% crude protein (CP, as fed) and 12.5MJ ME/kg dry matter (DM). As creep feed is usually made available from a feeder with a hopper, it is effectively available *ad lib*, so care is required to prevent rumen acidosis. Initially, the creep feed should contain digestible fibre sources such as sugar beet pulp, citrus pulp, wheatfeed or soya hulls, which can be gradually replaced by sources of energy with higher-starch contents.

Molasses can help bind the feed and make it more palatable. Creep feed should either be fed *ad lib* or at no more than 1-1.5kg/head per feed to avoid digestive upset. The creep feeders should be kept topped up to avoid the calves overeating in one session. To maximise feed intake, check the trough and clean it out if necessary each time the hopper is filled.

Examples of simple creep mixes:

- ⇒ 1/3 dark grains, 1/3 barley and 1/3 sugar beet pulp with beet pulp gradually reduced by half in favour of more cereals.
- ⇒ 57.5% barley, 25% beet pulp and 15% soya. Minerals should be included at 2.5%.

Last year, AHDB Beef & Lamb hosted a teleconference with Rhidian Jones on creep feeding. This can be found on the AHDB Beef & Lamb You Tube, [Beef & Lamb TV](#)