

Managing scouring calves

Calf scour (diarrhoea) is the most common disease in young calves, costing the UK cattle industry an estimated £11 million each year. The disease can be easily recognised and it is important that treatment is administered rapidly to maximise the chance of survival.

Scour is a symptom disease which develops after the lining of the intestines has been damaged by infectious agents including parasites, viruses and bacteria. As a consequence the calf loses fluid and electrolytes via runny or watery faeces.

The most common causes of calf scour include the parasites cryptosporidiosis and coccidiosis, the bacteria E.coli and Salmonella and the virus' rotavirus and coronavirus (Figure 1).

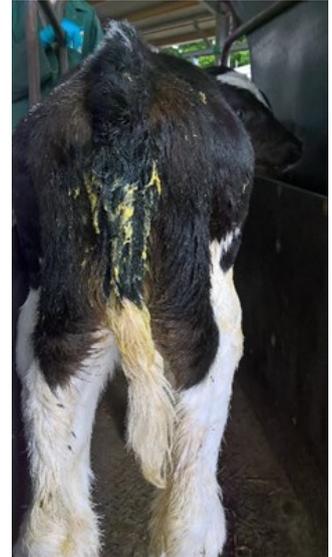
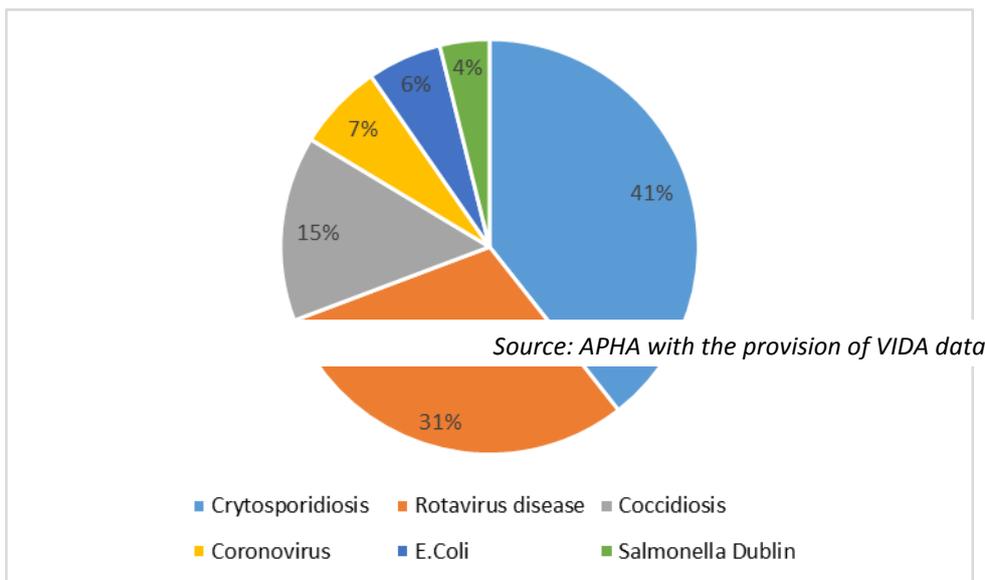


Figure 1: Main causes of calf scour, 2016



Scour is rarely caused by nutritional reasons (over-feeding or poor-quality milk replacer) alone and generally will have an underlying infectious cause. Contrary to popular opinion, it is not possible to tell from the appearance of the scour what has caused it.

Treatment

Animal Health Ireland recommends that the treatment of scours is based on three principles:

1. Separate the scouring calf

It is recommended that the scouring calf is removed from the rest of the group, this helps prevent the spread of infection and gives the calf a better chance of recovering. Scouring suckler calves and their dams should be separated from other calves and their mothers.

2. Provide the calf with electrolytes

The single most important treatment for a calf with scours is the replacement of the fluids and electrolytes it has lost. Give one or two extra feeds (2 litres each feed) of a good-quality oral rehydration solution while the calf is scouring. These should be given independent of milk feeds.

3. Continue to feed milk

Continuing to feed with milk or good-quality milk replacer does not cause, worsen or prolong scour. The milk actually helps the healing of the intestine. Continue to offer scouring calves normal amounts of milk or milk replacer as long as they want to drink. Do not feed diluted milk to calves. Leave suckler calves with their dams.

Milk or milk replacer should not be stomach tubed. Milk given repeatedly by stomach tube will lead to the build-up of acids in the rumen and damage the ruminal wall. Therefore, it is not recommended as a method of feeding milk to calves which are not drinking due to ill health. However, stomach tubing can be used for feeding of electrolyte fluids.

Antibiotic use

Antibiotics are not effective against parasites and viruses, which are the main causes of calf scour. Therefore, it is not necessary to treat calves with antibiotics just because they are scouring. The priority should be to rehydrate the calf with fluids and then discuss further treatment and testing with the vet.

Prevention

Whether a calf stays healthy or gets scour is determined by the balance between the resistance of the calf to infection and the level of infection to which it is exposed.

Good colostrum management is the single most important factor to improve the resistance of the calf to infection. Artificially reared calves need a first feed of three litres within two hours of birth followed by a second, similar sized feed within six to 12 hours of birth. Ensure suckler calves have suckled well within the first two hours of birth and top up with frozen or artificial colostrum if required.



Even if you have excellent colostrum management, good hygiene is still critical. Specific care should be taken to clean and disinfect feeding equipment between feeds and to clean the environment thoroughly on a regular basis and between batches of calves.

For more information see the BRP [Beef Diseases Directory](#).

For more information on cryptosporidiosis see the AHDB factsheet [Controlling Cryptosporidiosis in Calves](#).

This article is based on the Animal Health Ireland [Management of the Scouring Calf](#) factsheet.