



Dawson Creek Veterinary Clinic

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Low stress Weaning Techniques to Improve Calf Health ~by Dr. Christa Harder

Fall brings the season of cattle coming off pasture and weaning calves from their mothers. This is also one of the most stressful times in a calf's life. Stress at this time can dramatically impact calves health leading to decreased growth rate, depressing their immune system making them much more susceptible to disease. There are certain factors we are unable to mitigate, such as weather, however there are things we can do to help decrease the level of stress that we put on these calves at weaning time. One technique to minimize stress is low stress weaning. This certainly benefits a producer who backgrounds their own calves but producers that sell healthy high performing calves may receive a premium from feedlot buyers for pre-weaned calves as well. Low stress weaning leading to less stressed calves, results in less antimicrobials and other medications needed to treat sick calves. This is also very beneficial when trying to manage antimicrobial resistance issues. Minimizing stress will reduce disease problems occurring at weaning, reduce treatment costs, and enhance cattle performance post-weaning.

There are several different techniques that can be used to wean calves. The most stressful technique is simply to separate calves from cows and at the same time send them on the road to a sale yard.

There are two low - stress techniques described below:

1. Quiet Wean® nose tags: Calves are run through the chute and anti-suckling nose tags are applied, these calves are then turned back with the cows for 4-5 days. After this period the calves are then brought back to chute where the tags are removed and the calves are separated from the cows. This technique requires the purchase of the nose tags and separating the calves one additional time. An excellent video on two stage weaning can be found at www.quietwean.com/videos.
2. Fence Line weaning: Cows and calves are placed in the location that the calves will be weaned a few days before weaning, this way the calves will know where to access feed and water. After a few days cows and calves are separated and cows are placed in the area across the fence from the calves for 3-4 days. This way the calves and cows will still be able to hear and smell each other but the calves cannot nurse. Adjustments to the fence may need to be made to keep calves and cows from jumping over or going through. After a few days calves won't be as worried about where their moms are and won't be walking the fence line.

Studies have found 25% more weight gain within the first 2 weeks post weaning in calves weaned via low stress techniques vs abrupt weaning. Calves spent significantly less time walking the fence line and vocalizing which led to much more time spent eating/gaining weight. Even at 10 weeks, calves that had been abruptly weaned had not caught up in weight gain with the calves that were weaned by a low stress method.

A few other techniques that will minimize stress during the weaning period are:

1. Gradually start creep feeding calves the last 3-4 weeks before weaning so they can become accustomed to eating dry feed.

2. Process calves before weaning. During a stressful period a calf's immunity goes down making vaccines less effective for future protection. To get the most protective effect out of your vaccine and keep your calves healthier it is ideal to process calves 3-4 weeks before weaning. If a booster vaccine is given, administer the second dose 3-4 weeks post weaning.
3. When possible move the cow and not the calf. New environments are stressful on a calf and an older animal is better able to cope with changes to their environment.

Though some time is required to perform low stress weaning, there are substantial benefits to both the calf and the producer therefore we would highly encourage you to give it a try. If you have any questions regarding low stress weaning or preconditioning your calves please contact us at Dawson Creek Veterinary Clinic.