

North Star Veterinary Services Newsletter

December 2019

Calf Care Tips for Winter

Winter seems to have come early this year, so we would like to take the time to discuss some tips to help your calves thrive this winter. Calves, especially those under 3 weeks of age, have a harder time regulating their body temperature and have very little fat available to use. It is important to remember that calves start to use extra energy to keep warm whenever the air temperature goes below 50° Fahrenheit. The more energy they use to stay warm, the less energy they have to fight off disease and to grow.

1. Dry Newborn Calves - Dry hair works as an insulator. It keeps warm air close to the body and prevents extra heat loss. Newborn calves should be completely dry before putting them in a hutch or in a cold barn. This can be done by using warming boxes, warming rooms, or heat lamps. Toweling them dry can help to speed up this process.

2. Provide Deep, Dry Bedding – Calves spend 90% of their day lying down, so we want to provide thick, dry bedding to get them off the cold floor and prevent body heat loss. To test your bedding, a quick kneeling test can be done. Kneel in the bedding for 20 seconds. If your knees are wet or start to feel cold, more bedding needs to be added. Having bedding that the calves can “nest” in, such as straw, can also reduce the amount of heat loss to a calf. Nesting is when a calf is lying down and you cannot see their feet. For those who use bedding such as sawdust or shavings, calves will need blankets sooner in the year than those on straw.

3. Ventilation - Properly ventilating calves is a challenge, especially in winter. Removing drafts, especially for newborns, can be done by putting up solid panels, closing the rear vents on hutches, or placing straw bales in group pens. Keep in mind that we want to continue to provide fresh air. Ammonia buildup from the bedding can harm the calves and set them up to develop pneumonia. Getting down at the level of the calf can help you to gauge the quality of the air. Take a deep breath in. If you don't like, neither do they.

4. Hot Milk – Just like us, calves prefer their meals to be hot, especially in the winter. The closer the milk temperature is 102° F, the less energy the calf needs to bring it up to body temperature. Using a digital food thermometer can help you to make sure your milk is at the right temperature.

5. More Nutrition– As the temperatures get lower, energy needs will increase. Adding an extra quart per feeding or an additional feeding during the day can help meet those energy demands. Another way would be to get a milk replacer with a higher fat content to provide more calories per quart of milk. **Do not just add more milk replacer powder to the water.** When a higher powder to water ratio is used than what is instructed on the bag, we start to see more diarrhea in our calves. This will decrease the amount of calories the calf can absorb and will have the opposite effect of what we are trying to achieve.

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6. Clean, Dry Blankets - Calves less than 3 weeks of age and sick calves need to have blankets on when the temperature gets below 40° F. Calves should be completely dry before putting a blanket on because the blanket will trap in the moisture and make the calf colder if they are wet. During temperature swings, make sure that calves are not sweating under their blankets. When the temperature dips down again, the blanket will not be effective in keeping them warm. If calves are on clean, dry, deep bedding and are healthy, blankets can be removed around 3 weeks of age. Blankets should be cleaned between calves to prevent spread of disease and stored in a clean, dry space when not in use.

Calf care can be difficult, but following these tips can help provide building blocks for success. North Star Veterinary Service can provide custom recommendations for your specific setup to help your calves thrive this winter.

Christmas Hours

The office will be closed Wednesday, December 25th and all calls will be charged an emergency fee of \$75.00. Please plan accordingly with medicine requests and scheduling appointments around the holidays.