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Think longer term when milk feeding calves

As milk price falls, producers are being urged to think carefully before feeding whole milk to calves, despite the apparent short-term financial gain. We spoke to a vet and nutritionist to find out more.

TEXT ALY BALSOM

Producers may risk compromising calf health as well as the long-term sustainability and yield potential of their herd if they make attempts to cut costs by feeding calves whole milk.

That's the message from vets and milk-feeding specialists who are reminding rearers of the potential health risks associated with feeding whole milk, and urging producers to opt for a quality calf milk replacer (CMR), and avoid cutting costs during the milk-feeding stage.

A survey of more than 270 producers in 2024 revealed that some herds consider feeding whole milk. The results showed that one third agreed that it was not a good idea to feed whole milk to calves, 40% were unsure about the practice, and 25% disagreed that whole milk should not be fed.

Feed For Growth's (Volac Milk Replacers) Jessica Cooke says the milk-feeding period lays the foundations for success. "It's always worth investing in calf growth, whatever the milk price," she explains. "Ultimately, you're investing in your herd's future. If you cut back now, you're not making the most of high feed-conversion efficiency during the milk-feeding stage.

"By feeding whole milk, you could also inadvertently introduce disease, which could have a detrimental impact on growth and stop heifers from calving-in at 24 months, which is the optimum for health, survival and higher lifetime daily yield."

Lower risk

There are five main reasons to opt for a precision-formulated CMR, including lower health risk, better consistency and hygiene, improved starter intakes and higher amino acids.

With whole milk posing a particular risk for Johne's disease, bovine TB and *Mycoplasma bovis*, Kingshay vet



Jessica Cooke:
"CMR investment is worth it – whatever the milk price"

Michael Head believes it's worth feeding a quality CMR to safeguard calf health. "Mycoplasma is pretty endemic in the national dairy herd and has great ramifications on calf health and ongoing production," he explains. Mycoplasma bovis can be spread by oral–nasal contact and via milk, and is a factor in the calf pneumonia complex. Because pneumonia can reduce daily liveweight gains (DLWGs) and feed-conversion efficiency, it can have a profound impact on calf performance. Infection can cause DLWG to drop from a target of 0.8kg per day to 0.4kg per day, with growth failing to completely recover after that. This increases lifetime costs and reduces efficiency of production. Milk harvesting also poses a risk of Johne's and Bovine TB transmission because the diseases can be spread by oral–faecal contamination, as well as directly in the milk. This highlights the importance of hygienic collection, but also the risk of feeding whole milk.

Prolonged exposure

"Any animal is susceptible to Johne's disease up to six months of age," says Mr Head. "Although whole milk is not as risky as colostrum, it will prolong the period of potential exposure to Johne's disease." Dr Cooke says a hygienically prepared, precision-formulated CMR is the best way to safeguard against disease spread. "These calf milk replacers will always be the best option. They are 'bio-secure' and hygienic because they are made from pasteurised milk," she explains. If producers do opt to feed whole milk, pasteurisation should be considered and pooling should be avoided. Milk from Johne's-positive cows must never be fed to calves. When mixed and fed correctly, CMR delivers a consistent macro- and micro-nutrient supply to the calf, whereas the quality of whole milk can be hugely variable. "It's impossible to know day to day what the energy and protein of whole milk is, whereas milk replacer offers consistency," says Mr Head says. "There are also changes in temperature to consider. Producers could potentially be giving calves milk that's been harvested immediately before feeding, so it's warm, or milk that's hours old, so it could be a reservoir for bacterial growth



Michael Head:
"Feeding whole milk poses greater calf-health risk"

and a cause of scour and other health issues." As whole milk is collected directly from the cow, there is also more chance of faecal contamination, which again poses a disease risk to calves. When feeding neonates, rearers need to take a hazard analysis and critical-control point (HACCP) approach to feeding milk, to ensure food safety. "And there's more risk when you're feeding whole milk," adds Mr Head. Dr Cooke stresses that whether feeding whole milk or CMR, it should always be prepared in hygienic conditions and stored in clean containers. "Wash feeding equipment between groups and disinfect after every feeding to help reduce the spread of disease between calves," she says.

Solid-feed intake

High-quality calf milk replacer products, such as any formulation from Feed For Growth, tend to be lower in fat, but higher in lactose than whole milk, which will encourage a better solid-feed intake. "In comparison, whole milk can postpone the intake of solid feed by the calf, which may delay the age of successful weaning or result in post-weaning growth checks. This has the potential to prevent heifers from reaching a target age at first calving of 24 months old," adds Dr Cooke. High-quality CMRs, particularly those utilising concentrated whey protein, also offer superior and consistent amino-acid profiles for muscle growth compared to whole milk, which varies in quality. That said, not all CMRs are created equal so it's worth checking with individual merchants. Feed For Growth's Imunopro delivers high levels of essential amino acids, including lysine and leucine. Lysine is a vital amino acid for growth, while leucine is critical for driving muscle-protein synthesis and is the protein source of choice for athletes. CMR is also fortified with vitamins and minerals to ensure calf requirements are met. |



Calf performance: milk feeding should focus on ensuring that growth rates stay on target

Avoid feeding waste milk

As most producers are aware, waste milk from cows receiving antibiotic treatment should never be fed to any calves – whether beef or dairy – to avoid antimicrobial resistance. A Teagasc study showed that dairy-beef calves fed milk containing low levels of antibiotic residues had a greater number of resistant bacteria in their faeces compared to the control group fed a CMR. And these calves were more likely to have looser stools between nine and 12 weeks of age.