

Calf nutrition: Weaning

When is the right time to wean calves?

The basic requirement before weaning is to ensure the calf has adequate rumen development. This means calves will establish a robust microbial population for better food digestion and rumen function. Once the milk is removed, the calf should be able to meet requirement from the dry feed it consumes. Generally, calf rearers use age as an indicator to wean calves- the issue here is that you assume calves would have reached rumen development much later than they normally would. Majority of calves are fed for 10 weeks while new early weaning methods may suggest 8 weeks. Weaning early offer benefits such as reduced labour and feed costs. However, note that early weaning must be well managed and appropriately timed for each calf to be successful.

To be sure that your calves are ready to wean, calves should be consuming at least 1 kg of the **Rex James Calf Starter** for consecutive days. Give calves the opportunity to feed on an adequate amount of good quality and palatable calf starter. You want digestible starch as your main source of energy so they get the rumen developing by the production of VFA (Volatile Fatty Acids), Butyrate that stimulate papillae (projections on the rumen wall) development. More papillae = more sites for absorption of nutrients.

Gut fill may occur and limit intake therefore ensure that you don't feed too much long fibres. We don't want majority of the diet to be fibre which would take up valuable space of grain in the rumen. The key is to use a higher protein to energy ratio starter , such as the **Rex James Calf Starter**, so it drives more lean growth and increases the appetite of the young calves.

Rumen development should not, however, be the sole focus when growing healthy calves. It is during this post weaning prepuberty stage that mammary tissues are laid down. To reduce the inappropriate fat laydown focus on higher protein delivery.



Weaning approaches

Weaning no doubt is a stressful period for calves due to stressors such as changes in diets, environment (with it, exposure to more pathogens) and social grouping. When calves are stressed, they are prone to more diseases due to suppression of their immune system. It is important to ensure that weaning is done gradually. Try to limit changes to calves one at a time to minimise stress.

The commonly used approach to smoothen the transitioning is

50% reduction in milk intake for 10–14 days—>Reduce liquid feed allowance by 25–50% per week in the 2–4 weeks leading up to the target weaning date.

It pays to then monitor the calves' health and growth (both weight and height) regularly to assess their development (Read more on our Heifer management brochure).

Contact us to discuss enhanced calf weaning strategies that will suit your farm.

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