



Maximise your herd's potential

What are scours?

Gather together a group of calf raisers and the discussion will certainly turn to the topic of “scours”. It is the major cause of death in young calves and the bane of calf raisers’ lives. Scours is the layman’s term for neonatal diarrhoea. Technically it is “hyperfluidity of faeces”, or abnormally liquid manure. It is the consistency rather than the volume that defines it as diarrhoea.

So, what happens to calves when they get scours and why can they die?

Scours are a problem at some time on most dairies and frequently have multiple causes, involving a combination of infection as well as nutritional, management & environmental factors. They are often precipitated by stress.

Scours can be pathogenic i.e. caused by infective agents such as bacteria & viruses, or nutritional i.e. irritation of the gut by abrupt feed changes or too much feed. They can also be induced by electrolyte imbalance (e.g. incorrect measuring of ingredients in home made electrolyte mix).

WHAT IS NORMAL?

The first bowel motion of a baby calf will be firm, dark yellowy-green and sticky; this is called meconium. Once milk has passed through the digestive system, normal faeces for a young calf should be a mustard colour and firm in consistency. Normal body function involves a recycling of fluids which are secreted from the blood into the intestine to aid digestion and then reabsorbed from the intestine into the bloodstream for the purpose of absorbing nutrients and maintaining blood pH & hydration levels.

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN THINGS GO WRONG?

Diarrhoea results when the microbial or nutritional causes of scours damage or kill the cells lining the intestine and thus interfere with the recycling of fluid and cause the absorption of intestinal contents to be impaired, or the secretion of fluid from the blood into the intestine to increase.

Diarrhoea causes several important malfunctions in the calf’s body. These include dehydration, imbalance of electrolytes (“body salts”), acidosis and loss of energy. The visible signs of dehydration are sunken eyes, dryness of the mouth and nose and pale gums. Dehydration causes the blood to thicken which places increased pressure on the heart and makes it harder for its heart to deliver blood to the tissues. It is the effects of dehydration and acidosis that usually kills calves, rather than the original infection.