



RENAISSANCE NUTRITION, INC.

Renaissance Nutrition, Inc.
PO Box 229
481 Frederick Road
Roaring Spring, PA 16673
www.rennut.com

TECHNICAL RELEASE

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Contact: Wayne A. Cooke - [814-793-2113](tel:814-793-2113) / wcooke@rennut.com

Avoiding Heat Stress in Calves

By Dr. Andrew Holloway, DVM

Courtesy of Milk Products, Inc.

As summer temperatures creep into the 80's, 90's and above, heat stress can negatively impact calf performance. Heat stress affects calf health by causing rapid dehydration, and reduced immune system function. Researchers have determined that heat stressed calves often have reduced circulating immunoglobulin concentrations and increased stress hormone concentrations ⁽¹⁾. Elevated body temperatures ranging from 103-108°F can result in very sick calves. Growth rates are also reduced during periods of heat stress secondary to lower feed intakes and higher maintenance energy requirements. When ambient temperatures exceed 80°F, calves must burn more energy in order to dissipate heat from the body by sweating and increasing respiratory rate. In this case, less of the nutrient consumed is devoted to growth and average daily gains suffer.

Efforts should be made to identify and avoid heat stress in calves. If you see increased respiratory rates, open mouth breathing, decreased appetite, and reluctance to move, your calves may be suffering from heat stress. This summer, consider the following tips to assure proper calf health and growth is maintained.

Environment:

- Reduce sun exposure – Use barns and hutches that do not allow sunlight to contact the calf. Eighty percent shade cloth is recommended on greenhouse barns and translucent hutches. A study performed by Lammers et al. in Pennsylvania showed daytime air temperatures inside translucent hutches were 3.6°F to 5.4°F higher than outside air ⁽²⁾. The study also noted higher calf body temperature, higher respiratory rates, higher water intake, and lower feed intake in translucent hutches when compared to opaque hutches.
- Improved air flow – Natural ventilation buildings should have all vents completely opened including ridge and eave vents, as well as side wall curtains. In addition to open vents, hutches may also have the back end elevated using wooden or concrete blocks to improve ventilation. Hutches should also have enough space in between them to provide for adequate air flow. For mechanically ventilated calf barns assure a 45 second air exchange rate or at least 100 cfm for each 100 pounds of animal ⁽³⁾.
- Bedding – Consider the use of sand bedding. Sand bedding does not insulate the calf. It also may help reduce the fly population.

Diet and Management:

- Free choice water – Constant access to free choice, fresh water is a must for summertime calf rearing. Calves exposed to heat stress can consume between 3 and 6 gallons per day. If calves are running out of water between feedings, a third water feeding may be necessary to prevent dehydration and assure proper health.

- Stresses – Perform stressful events in the early morning. Examples of stressful events include moving, grouping, vaccinating, dehorning, and castrating. Evening temperatures seem cool, but animal body temperatures lag behind ambient temperature by 4-6 hours. The morning is best.

Sources

- (1) Stott, G.H., F. Wiersma, B.E. Menefee, and F.R. Radwanski. 1976. Influence of environment on passive immunity in calves. J. Dairy Sci. 59: 1306.
- (2) Lammers, B.P., J.W. Van Koot, A.J. Heinrichs and R.E. Graves, 1996. The effect of plywood and polyethylene calf hutches on heat stress. Applied Engineering in Agriculture 12(6): 741.
- (3) Dan McFarland, Penn State Extension Agricultural Engineer.

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