



Considerations For Managing Group Housed Calves

Managing pre-weaned calves in group housing is different than managing young calves in individual pens or hutches. Assessing things like the amount of milk, water or solid feed consumed, or manure passed is much simpler when calves are housed individually, however some auto-feeders do monitor milk intake. However, producers can successfully raise healthy and well-grown calves efficiently in groups from a young age.

Calf age

Calves can be successfully pair-housed with a calf of the same or similar age from three to six days after birth. For veal farmers, this means calves can often be paired or grouped as they arrive on the veal operation, as calves should be at least seven days old before leaving the dairy farm. If you purchase calves that you know were pair or group housed on the dairy farm, you can place them into similar groups on arrival at the veal farm. Calves that were individually housed on the dairy farm will benefit from some time to adjust to their new surroundings before being placed into a group. This can minimize the stress of relocation.

Ideally, calves grouped together should be within seven days of age. Grouping calves with an age range of more than three weeks between the youngest and oldest calf in the group complicates weaning and can spread pathogens from older to younger calves. To ensure calves are grouped in appropriate age ranges, more groups with smaller numbers of calves may be needed instead of one or two larger groups. If ages are not known, calves can be grouped by similar weights.

An “all-in-all-out” approach to calf grouping – such as placing all calves born within the same week together into a stable group, rather than continuously adding new calves to an existing group, can reduce stress and disease transmission between calves. Placing a young calf in a group with a wider range of ages is risky. These calves must be healthy, vigorous, and have a strong suckle reflex. This typically occurs at seven to fourteen days of age.

Group size

Pair housing: A great way to get both your calves and yourself used to group housing calves is to pair-house calves. Some penning designs allow you to remove a partition between individual pens to create a larger pen for a pair of calves. Pair housing is a good balance between the benefits of group and individual housing; the calf has social contact and more usable space but can health and milk intake can still be monitored fairly closely.

Small group housing (three to eight calves): When considering the benefits or drawbacks between group and individual calf housing, the size of the group is an essential consideration. Small groups of three to eight calves are recommended. Like pair housing, small groups give calves increased space and social contact while also providing lower rates of disease and the ability to monitor calves closely. In 2003, Svensson et. al. studied over 3 000 calves on 122 farms and found that, in smaller groups, the incidence of sickness and mortality to common calf-hood illnesses such as respiratory disease and diarrhea is more likely to be similar to that of individually housed calves. In contrast, the same study found that in groups larger than ten, the mortality rate is significantly higher than the rate seen in individually housed calves or calves in small groups.

Large group sizes can result in increased competition for teats, especially if only one teat is available, such as with many automatic feeding systems. You may find calves “waiting” at the feeder more often. This reduces the time calves spend laying down and may increase aggression. Competition for access prevents younger or weaker calves from accessing adequate milk. While many automatic milk feeders are described as having the ability to feed a large number of calves from one station, stocking calves at numbers under the maximum recommended by the manufacturer is beneficial to reducing these common group housing problems.

Health and disease

Calves housed in individual pens with some contact with other calves (such as nose-to-nose), or a shared room or ventilation system can transmit disease. Allowing calves full body contact, such as in a group pen, does not significantly increase the ways in which disease can be transmitted among calves. Even in calves housed in hutches where calves cannot directly contact their neighbour, airborne pathogens can move from calf to calf.

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Like individually housed calves, calves in group pens must be monitored closely for signs of illness or disease. Be sure each calf in the group is observed daily. See Veal Farmers of Ontario’s “*Detecting Calf Disease Early*” for signs and symptoms to be aware of. Using specialized iPad apps may also be beneficial for ensuring each calf in a group is being routinely monitored in a standardized manner and the information is recorded. See Calf Care Corner’s, “*Tracking health scores*” for more information.

If you have an automatic milk feeder, observe the calves before checking data daily to ensure that all calves are coming to the feeder and drinking their usual amount. A sudden change in behaviour at the feeder can be an early sign of sickness. If calves are fed by mob feeding, ensure all calves are getting up to drink milk when it is delivered.

Weight gain in groups should be equal or better than weight gains in calves housed individually. This could be due to the fact that group housed calves consume more solid feed. Additionally, some studies have found improved feed efficiency among group housed calves when compared to individually housed calves.

Handling weak or sick calves

Weak or sick calves must be removed from groups if they are unable to access resources such as milk, solid feed, water, or resting space. Consider pair-housing them with a similar size calf or housing them individually, but within sight of other calves. This allows you to ensure they get specialized care, putting them back on the right track to becoming a healthy, productive herd member.

Space allowance

The Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA)’s “*Management of Grain-fed Veal Calves*” Factsheet recommends that group housing for veal calves provide a minimum of 1.5 to 2.0 m² per pre-weaned calf (younger than six to eight weeks) in group pens. From weaning until market, OMAFRA’s minimum space recommendations increase to about 3.5 m² per animal. For groups of six calves or more, the 2009 European Union Directive on minimum standards for the protection of calves requires a minimum space allowance (per calf) of 1.5 m² for cattle under 150 kg, 1.7 m² for cattle between 150 to 220 kilograms, and 1.8 m² for cattle over 220 kg.

Ideally, feed should be offered ad libitum to veal cattle. In this case, OMAFRA that states 20 to 30 cm per calf at the manger is sufficient. However, be sure to watch calf behaviour around feed delivery. If there is competition, such as head-butting or displacement of calves, there is not enough space at the manger. Increasing bunk space to 55 cm per calf or offering additional feed should reduce competition at the feed bunk.

As water is critical for encouraging dry matter intake, at least one water bowl per 10 to 12 calves should be provided. For groups of less than ten, there should be one water bowl per pen.

Cross sucking

Cross-sucking (sucking on pen mates) is an abnormal behaviour in calves and can lead to injuries of the calf that is being sucked on. Cross sucking is seen more often in group housing simply because calves now have the opportunity to suck on one another. In individual pens, calves are typically seen sucking on pen fixtures rather than other calves. Prevalence of cross-sucking is related to method and amount of milk fed. Feeding calves from nipples and increasing milk allowance may reduce cross-sucking. Installing dry nipples may also reduce cross sucking by redirecting sucking to the nipple, rather than other calves.

Summary

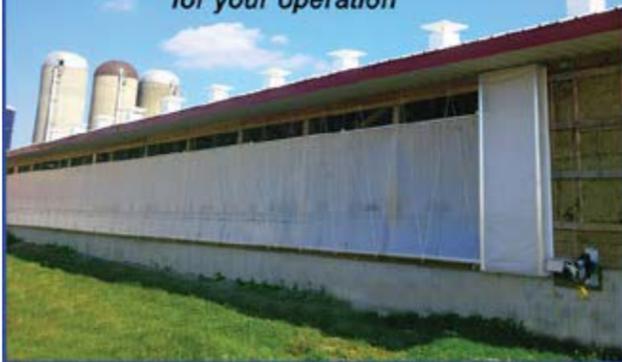
While group calf housing can be very successful, it does require a different calf management style than individual systems. Finding the group management system that works best for you and your calves may require some trial and error. Working closely with your herd veterinarian, nutritionist, and your calf staff is essential to making group housing successful. ■

This project was funded in part through *Growing Forward 2 (GF2)*, a federal-provincial-territorial initiative. The Agricultural Adaptation Council assists in the delivery of GF2 in Ontario.



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