

## Early disease detection – summary article for Alliance

By Melissa Speirs, Project Coordinator

The first few weeks of the calf's life, from birth to weaning, are a critical for health. Sick calves have a significant loss in production, showing reduced weight gain, even after being successfully treated for a disease. Early disease detection improves overall herd health because infected veal cattle will be treated sooner, which improves cure rates and minimizes disease spread. This is especially important to veal producers, as young calves are at an increased risk of getting sick, especially when transported, weaned, or mixed in new groups. Reducing calf mortality and morbidity from preventable and treatable diseases could significantly increase profitability of your farm.

Factors that increase disease risk in calves include prolonged close contact between the cow and the newborn calf, exposure of the calf to manure or contaminated bedding from older cattle, drafty or cold housing conditions, inadequate nutrition, exposure to other sick calves, and not getting enough high quality colostrum or colostrum replacer. While veal producers are not usually responsible for completing these management practices, it is important you source calves from dairy farms who pay attention to these details.

In order to detect disease early, check calves at least twice daily. If a calf displays any of the following signs, they may be sick.

**Manure** - Changes in the colour, consistency, quantity, or smell of manure.

**Calf's posture and demeanour** - The calf appears depressed, lethargic, is in an abnormal position, or does not get up when stimulated.

**Eyes** - The eyes appear dull, sunken, or have a discharge in the corners.

**Coat condition** - The hair coat appears to be dull, matted or damp, hair is long and shaggy, or the hair stands up along the back.

**Ears** - The ears may hang down, be droopy, or are cold to the touch.

**Nose** - The nose is dry, cracked or crusty, has a purulent discharge, or contains excess mucous.

**Navel** - The navel is swollen, hot, hard, or painful (calf kicks at the navel or struggles when the navel is touched).

**Breathing** - If a calf's breathing is shallow, laboured, rapid, uneven, or if the calf is coughing, grunting, or whistling while it breathes, this may indicate illness.

**Rectal temperature** - **Normal rectal temperature for a calf is 38.6 to 39.4°C.** Newborn calves have slightly higher normal temperatures between 38.5 to 40.5°C.

**Appetite** - Unfinished meals, poor suckle response and slower drinking speed are indicators of poor or decreased appetite. If your calves are group housed, check data from the automatic feeder or observe calves at milk delivery to ensure all calves are going to the feeder and drinking for the same amount of time.

**Growth** - Poor gain in height or weight.

**Response to stimuli** - The calf has no response or is slow to respond to feeding time or the presence of a person.

If you are unsure if a calf is sick, take its temperature. If a calf is found to be sick, consult with your herd veterinarian on appropriate treatment or follow health protocols that were developed with your veterinarian. Early detection of sick calves, accurate diagnosis, and timely treatment will prevent future disease outbreaks – saving you time and expense while ensuring calves grow to their full production potential.

See Veal Farmers of Ontario's "*Early Disease Detection*" booklet for more details on identifying disease and preventing it from becoming a serious problem on your farm.

Picture: N:\N Drive\Livestock Alliance\Projects\On-Farm Animal Welfare\VEAL\Photo library\Early disease detection "Sick calf"