

Introduction

The goal of a grain-fed veal farmer is to achieve the desired finish on veal cattle at the right weight and age. Ideally, market-ready grain-fed veal cattle should weigh between 295 to 320 kg (650 to 705 lbs.) at 28 to 32 weeks (seven to eight months) of age. To achieve this goal, it is critical to have the right feed rations and ratios.

Veal is defined as cattle of any dairy breed or dairy crossbreed dressing no more than 190 kg (419 lbs.). This converts to a live weight of roughly 349 kg (769 lbs.), which is reached at approximately eight months of age. Producers are strongly encouraged to target a dress weight of 180 kg (397 lbs.) to maintain some flexibility within the system to manage veal carcass weights.

- Average daily gain (ADG) should be 1.2 kg (2.6 lbs.) or better. Targeting daily gains above 1.5 kg (3.3 lbs.) may require additional nutrient requirements.

Grain-fed veal cattle are fed a balanced ration based of grain (usually clean, whole-shelled corn) and pellets made of protein, vitamins, and minerals. A small amount of fibre should be offered daily to maintain rumen health. Cattle should also have continuous access to their feed, to encourage slower eating and stimulate chewing. Ensure there is adequate bunk space for each animal.

Best practices for veal cattle foot and leg health

The surfaces that veal cattle stand, walk, and lie on significantly impact their well-being. Proper flooring and bedding choices influence animal comfort, movement, thermoregulation, and overall health. Thermoregulation is the temperature range at which an animal uses no additional energy to maintain its core body temperature. This is called the thermoneutral zone and key to the well-being of veal cattle. It is affected by flooring and bedding choices, to name a few.

Maintaining healthy feet and legs in veal cattle is an integral part of proper care and management directly impacting productivity. Healthy cattle grow efficiently, resulting in better production outcomes. Following the requirements and recommended practices found in the *Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Veal Cattle* (the Code) can help to maintain optimal growth rates and reduce losses due to lameness or other health issues.

Different flooring types significantly impact the well-being of veal cattle. A requirement of flooring is that it must be designed and maintained to minimize slipping and injury.

To evaluate if the flooring type is working in the barn, animals should be evaluated for bursitis at the time of shipping to calculate the overall foot and leg health of the group.

Bursitis

Bursitis is an inflammatory reaction within a bursa. A bursa is a closed, fluid-filled sac that works as a cushion and gliding surface to reduce friction between tissues of the body. The main area observed when assessing bursitis in veal cattle is the hock, the joint on the back leg of a bovine (see photo).



Bursitis is generally characterized by swelling, local heat, and pain on palpation (to touch the area). Research suggests that veal cattle have more bursitis and carpal joint swelling on hard flooring (concrete slats, perforated concrete) than on soft flooring (rubber slats, slats with rubber cover, or perforated rubber mats). In one epidemiological study on young veal cattle, a higher risk for bursitis was reported for calves on wooden slats (1.5 times higher) and on concrete (four times higher) compared to straw or rubber at two weeks before harvest.

The research also states that a space allowance of less than 1.8 m² per animal is associated with a higher prevalence of bursitis.

Monitoring bursitis

As finished veal cattle are being loaded on trucks, special attention should be paid attention to the hocks. A requirement in the Code is that corrective action is necessary if the number of animals with bursitis exceeds 15 per cent in three consecutive cycles before shipping.

When doing daily pen checks keep an eye on veal cattle for injuries related to flooring or facility design (e.g., hairless patches, lameness, knee and hock swelling) for early detection.

Improving rates of bursitis

Below are a few best management practices to consider when improving the rates of bursitis.

- Choose non-slip but not overly abrasive flooring types.
- Avoid bare concrete slatted flooring; provide softer options with good drainage (e.g., rubber-coated flooring, perforated rubber mats, or access to bedded areas).
- Aim for less than 10 per cent bursitis prevalence in finished veal.
- Ensure solid flooring slopes appropriately for effective drainage.
- Have a section of the pen that provides a bedded area for cattle.

By following these practices, veal producers can promote optimal foot and leg health, ensuring the well-being of their animals. The choices made regarding flooring directly influence animal comfort. Proper management practices, as outlined in the Code, provide a framework for maintaining optimal conditions.

Conclusion

Implementing the above best practices not only enhances the welfare of veal cattle but also contributes to better growth rates and reduces the incidence of lameness and other health-related losses. Regular inspections, appropriate corrective actions, and consistent adherence to recommended guidelines ensure a high standard of care.

By prioritizing the well-being of veal cattle through proper flooring and bedding management, veal producers can achieve sustainable and efficient production, benefiting both the animals and the industry.

For more information:

As part of your research into starting a grain-fed veal farm, you are encouraged to talk to experienced veal producers, visit their farms (while following strict biosecurity protocols), and attend industry events and meetings. No two veal farms are the same and a lot of valuable information will be learned from each visit and event.

Find VFO website producer resources here: <https://bit.ly/VFOProducerResources>

Find the *Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Veal Cattle* here: <http://bit.ly/theVealCode>

Find Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness veal resources here: <https://ontario.ca/page/veal-farming>

References available upon request.

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