

### 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.

### On-arrival protocols

The first two weeks after arrival is a critical period for the health and welfare of calves. To reduce the risk of mortality and even sickness, it is important that protocols are established prior to calves arriving and everyone on the team follow them.

For the protocols to be encompassing they should be established with the help of the herd veterinarian. Veal Farmers of Ontario (VFO) has worked with Dr. Dave Renaud to establish protocol templates for veterinarians available in the veterinarian portal on <https://calfcare.ca>.

The following is a guideline to consider when drafting an on-arrival protocol to set calves up for success.

**NOTE:** Producers must have a valid, ongoing veterinary-client-patient relationship with a licenced veterinarian and at least one on-farm visit per year.

#### **Cleaning and disinfecting**

Cleaning and disinfecting facilities and feeding equipment will have a significant impact on the health and welfare of the calves, leading to improved performance and reduced antibiotic use. Protocols should include the following requirements:

- *Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Veal Cattle* (the Code) requirements
  - Cleaning and disinfection procedures for all facilities housing cattle must be developed and implemented
    - Cleaning procedures for feeding and watering equipment must be developed and implemented
    - Prior to calf arrival, milk-mixing and milk feeding equipment must be cleaned and disinfected

#### **Ventilation**

- Check the ventilation to ensure everything is in good repair and working order
- Adjust fans as required

## **Water**

- Prior to arrival check to make sure the water bowls are working and are clean
- Water bowls/buckets must be cleaned daily to ensure calves have constant access to fresh, clean water
- After the initial milk feeding, offer water and electrolytes

## **Housing**

- Calves housed in hutches and outdoor enclosures must not be tethered and calves in hutches must be able to access an area outside the hutch
- If housing calves individually, they must be grouped no later than eight weeks of age. Calves must be allowed to turn completely around without assistance, groom, adopt sternal and lateral (on their side with legs extended) resting postures, easily stand up and lie down, and have visual and physical contact with other cattle
- If housing calves in groups, cattle must be able to easily stand up and lie down, turn around, groom, adopt sternal and lateral resting postures, and rest on the enclosure floor at the same time

For a complete listing of requirements refer to the Code on <https://vealfarmers.ca>.

## **Bedding**

- Ensure that bedding is appropriate for the time of the year
- Perform the “kneel test” or refer to VFO’s “A producer guide to evaluating nesting scores” resource here: <https://calfcare.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Nesting-Score-VFO-online.pdf>

## **Handling**

It can be overwhelming with the arrival of many calves at one time. It is important to remember that these are young animals, and care and patience must be taken when handling them. There is a saying if you have five minutes to move calves it will take two hours. If you have two hours, it will take five minutes. Ensure all team members have been trained on calf handling.

- Handle calves in a quiet manner, abusive handling is unacceptable
  - Do not use electric prods!

## **Arrival**

- Whenever possible, newly received calves should be segregated from the general barn population
- It is recommended that compromised calves be identified, separated, and provided treatment if needed
- Where possible keep the new calves grouped together
- Ensure calves do not have a fever
  - Normal calf temperature is 38.5°C
- Evaluate calves for signs of dehydration
  - Ensure eyes are not sunken
  - Test skin elasticity
- Ensure calves have a dry, healed navel
  - An infected navel can cost around \$40.00
- Evaluate feces
  - Diarrhea could cost up to \$150 in losses per case
- Administer any medications/vitamins in the neck unless otherwise recommended by veterinarian
- Health records regarding medications received or any broken needles should accompany the calf

## **Feeding**

- Not knowing the history of the calves, the last feeding could have been the night before. They need energy and then rest
- Calves should be fed a milk ration on arrival, feed newest calves first

The success of a calf starts before it is purchased with the amount of high-quality colostrum it is given at birth, and then it is up to the care it receives when it arrives at the veal operation. Purchase good quality calves that are fed four litres of colostrum at birth and spend the time to ensure they get off to a good start. ***“An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.”***

### 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://vealfarmers.ca/producer-information/resources/>

Find the *Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Veal Cattle* here:

[https://vealfarmers.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/veal\\_cattle\\_code\\_of\\_practice.pdf](https://vealfarmers.ca/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/veal_cattle_code_of_practice.pdf)

*References available upon request.*

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#### **Find us on social:**

X: [@OntarioVeal](#)

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[Finishing grain-fed veal in Ontario](#) private group

[Marketing of male dairy calves in Ontario](#) private group

Disclaimer: This resource is for educational purposes only. Veal Farmers of Ontario is not responsible for any business or management decisions made by consulting this resource.

*Revised: May 2025*