



## Dairy Issue Briefs

DIBS



DIB# 13-09

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Plummeting prices in the dairy industry are creating critical cash-flow and long-term survivability issues on Ohio's 3,328 dairy farms. Cost-cutting decisions must be made with full awareness of both short and long-term production and economic consequences. OSU Extension's Dairy Working Group, a collaboration of OSU Extension Educators and Specialists discuss:

### **Reducing costs to improve short term cash flow**

#### **Can I feed my calves "half rations" to save money?**

**Probably not.** Most calves are not fed enough to cut them back to "half rations" to save money and still achieve weight gain. At a feeding rate of one pound of 20:20 milk replacer (MR) powder per day, a newborn, 90 pound calf consumes enough nutrients to gain 0.5 pound per day in warm weather. She should also have access to a high quality starter and plenty of clean, fresh water. A calf fed only 0.5 pounds of MR powder per day will lose weight.

Even though she starts eating grain at about a week of age, it will take at least 2 weeks of grain consumption for the rumen to develop to the point where she will be able to get a significant amount of her nutrition from grain. At about the same time, she will not be able to continue gaining a half pound per day from milk replacer alone, so the nutrients she gets from the starter will allow her to continue gaining at least a half pound per day depending on how much starter she eats.

A calf can be cut back to once a day feeding of half of her normal MR ration the week before she is completely weaned from milk at 5 weeks of age or older. This strategy gives her a transition from her MR, starter grain and water diet to her post-weaning starter grain and water diet. Note: calves can be successfully raised to weaning without hay in their ration, and achieve better rumen development without hay in their ration, a potential cost savings for some farms.

Healthy calves are growing calves. If the current calf program is designed for greater than a half pound of gain per day, then some reduction in MR feeding could be considered, understanding that rate of gain will be compromised and may require ration and management changes in older calves depending on your targets for breeding age and age at first calving.

We are fortunate that in Ohio, we will soon be regularly enjoying temperatures above 60°F. These temperatures, within the thermoneutral zone of young calves, will allow the calf to use more of the available nutrients for growth rather than maintenance.



**Bottom Line:** Underfeeding calves with “half rations” compromises their growth and ability to fight environmental and pathogenic challenges. Review length of milk feeding period for opportunities to wean earlier and transition to a high-quality starter grain (see DIB# 9-09). Farms feeding hay to pre-weaned calves do have the opportunity to achieve earlier rumen development and cost savings by removing hay from their diet.

Author: Dianne Shoemaker, Extension Dairy Specialist, Wooster.

Contact at [shoemaker.3@osu.edu](mailto:shoemaker.3@osu.edu), 330-257-3377.

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