

Reducing costs to improve short term cash flow:

Should I wean calves earlier?

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The answer to this question depends on your answers to 3 more questions:

- 1) When do you wean calves now?
- 2) What is your target rate of gain?
- 3) How good is your calf manager?

The 2014 NAHMS Dairy Survey found that 9.2% of heifer calves are weaned at 8 weeks of age, and another 65.3% between 8 and 13+ weeks. If you fall into either of these categories, weaning earlier could save you money. If you are part of the 7.4% that already wean at 6 weeks of age or earlier, weaning a week earlier will save you less than \$2 per calf in feed costs and will cost you more in decreased growth and performance.

If your answer to (1) was 7 weeks or more, and you are feeding for 1.0 lb/day or more of gain, you have some opportunity to save a few dollars.

First quarter 2020 milk replacer price was around \$1.18/lb for a 20:20 milk replacer (MR) powder and approximately 28¢/lb for a 20% CP calf starter. A calf fed for 1.0 lb/day of gain using 1.6 lb/day of MR powder will eat \$13.32 worth of MR per week. She will also eat between \$1 and \$2 worth of starter grain. If she was weaned, she would consume about 4 lb/day of starter (no, not the first few days after weaning), which would cost a little over \$1/day or \$8/week. Savings will be between \$4 and \$5 per calf for a one-week-earlier weaning.

If your target rate of gain is 1.5 lb/day, feeding a 27:20 milk replacer that costs \$1.40/lb will cost you \$19.66 a week. She will also eat between \$1 and \$2 worth of starter grain. For each week, the calf is weaned earlier than normal, savings would average about \$13 per calf, but rate of gain will be decreased. A step-down weaning program is advised. Calves should be eating at least 1.0 lb/day of starter when weaning begins, 2 lb/day during weaning, and 4 lb/day after weaning.

If targeted gain is 0.5 lb/day or less, weaning earlier will not result in large savings. Feeding 1.0 lb/day of the 20:20 MR powder costs \$8.26 per week plus \$1 to \$2 of starter per week results in a total feed cost between \$9.26 and \$10.26 per week. The weaned calf will eat about \$7.00 of starter each week.

The smaller weaned calf will consume less starter than calves fed for a higher rate of gain. Potential savings range from \$2.26 to \$3.26 per calf for a one-week-earlier weaning. Calves fed using this program gain very little pre-weaning, averaging 0.2 lb/day of gain when outside temperatures are around 65° F.



Bottom Line:

Calves can be successfully weaned at 5 or 6 weeks of age, but they need excellent management to maintain growth and health both pre- and post weaning. Weaning a week earlier will not save much money at lower levels of milk replacer feeding. At higher rates of feeding, savings could be worthwhile if calves are currently fed milk replacer for 8 or more weeks.

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