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Blanket tube-feeding of dairy calves
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Question raised by requestor

In some places, the standard practice to feed all new-born calves – regardless of their vitality or presence of a sucking reflex – is exclusively via an oesophageal tube. The practice involves routine administration of 3 to 4 litres of colostrum through a tube shortly after birth, followed by continued milk feeding using the same method. The calves are separated from the dam immediately after birth, and tube feeding is applied uniformly. We would greatly appreciate it if you could share any expert opinions, scientific articles, or relevant documents regarding calf feeding practices – particularly those involving the exclusive use of oesophageal tubes.

Answer

EURCAW *Ruminants & Equines* published a Thematic Fact Sheet on the provision of colostrum to calves (Veissier, 2024). We do not recommend routine feeding of colostrum via oesophageal tubing for newborn calves. In the specific section on how to provide colostrum to calves, we stipulate that:

> *'If the calf does not suckle enough colostrum from its dam, the dam's colostrum is of poor quality, or the dam and calf are separated immediately after birth, colostrum can be given from a teat bottle.*
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> *If the new-born calf does not suckle colostrum from the cow or bottle (i.e., weak, ill/injured calves or with a low motivation for suckling), a clean oesophageal/stomach tube can be inserted to facilitate direct feeding. This option should not be used unless necessary due to the stress involved for the calf and the risks from incorrect positioning.*
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> *Feeding equipment (teats, bottles, buckets, stomach tubes) should be cleaned and disinfected after each use and always between calves.'*

Some calves may drink more when fed milk by oesophageal tubing (Shah et al., 2019). However, ingestion of milk via an oesophageal tubing does not promote the closure of the oesophageal groove to the same extent as suckling or ingesting milk from a teat bottle. The closure of the oesophageal groove allows the colostrum to enter the abomasum of the calves where it will be digested. Indeed, feeding milk to calves by oesophageal tubing may result in some milk passing into the reticulum and the abomasum, causing ruminal acidosis (Braun et al., 2022).

EURCAW *Ruminants & Equines* recommends that calves are allowed to suckle their dam to ingest colostrum. If a calf has difficulties standing up, finding the teats or suckling, it must be helped. If it is not possible to keep the calf and its dam together, then the calf should be provided with colostrum from a teat bottle. Only if the calf is unable to suckle or to drink from a teat bottle, an oesophageal tube should be used. This should be done by a trained person to ensure correct positioning of the tube and to avoid stressing the calf.

References

1. Veissier, I. (2024). Thematic factsheet - Colostrum provision to calves. EURCAW Ruminants & Equines. https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.12204416
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3. Braun U, Kochan M, Weber F, Kaske M and Bleul U 2022. Repeated drenching of calves - Ultrasonographic findings of the reticulum and abomasum and short-term effects on pH and D-lactate in rumen fluid and blood. Schweizer Archiv Fur Tierheilkunde 164, 243-248.