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Summer Pneumonia in Calves

It is often thought that stress associated with calving, calf processing, artificial insemination and other direct, close contact with the cow herd is over when they get turned out to grass. While it is generally true that the summer grazing season lets cows do “normal cow things”, this is not a time to let your guard down on watchful management. One issue that can be a rapid problem, is summer or nursing-calf pneumonia. Let’s take a look at this topic today.

Beef producers normally spot this condition when they notice a lethargic calf with droopy ears, reluctant to get up and measure a high fever. The calf may or may not cough or have visible difficulty breathing. You may think that respiratory issues are related to stress periods or changes in the weather, but it can become a problem on grass. This can especially be an issue when calves received lower quality colostrum than usual due to stress on the cows in the winter. Lower passive immunity from low quality colostrum can lead to increased health related issues, including summer pneumonia.

The most likely age for calves to be diagnosed with pneumonia is between 70-150 days of age, often in late summer for spring calving herds. It is especially important to keep very close tabs on calf health this summer, and if treatment is necessary, to intervene earlier rather than later. Speak with your veterinarian if you have questions regarding how to best approach vaccinating calves as well as what you’ll want to use to treat summer pneumonia if identified it in your calves. Treatment is usually effective with this condition when administered early in the course of the disease.

Summer pneumonia is not common and is oftentimes very survivable with the right treatment. Studies show that about one in five herds will experience pre-weaning pneumonia, and within those herds up to 15% of the calves can be infected. One prevention strategy is to vaccinate the calves against bovine respiratory disease around three months of age, but that isn’t a guarantee that they won’t get sick. Some of this is due to young animals typically not responding as well to vaccines as ones that are closer to weaning age of six to seven months of age.

Certain weather events can increase the risk of developing summer pneumonia. Late spring blizzards or rain can deprive the calf of normal nursing patterns and produce chilling in calves. Late spring or summer high temperatures can produce heat stress in cows and calves, resulting in greater susceptibility to infectious agents. Also, dry, dusty conditions can increase susceptibility because the calves’ normal distinctive, clearing defense mechanisms can be overwhelmed, which allows for pathogens to multiply and gain access to the lungs of young calves. Mixing groups together after calving, such as moving cow-calf pairs to pasture or mixing groups together for heat synchronization and artificial insemination procedures, can result in allowing the transmission of infectious agents.

If you are not sure if it is pneumonia that is occurring and the calf dies, a veterinarian can generally diagnose this condition with a high level of certainty during a post-mortem exam. Having these calves posted by a veterinarian can also rule out other possibilities and allow the vet to recommend the ideal course of action for future cases. During the summer months it is very important to get any dead calf that will be presented for a post-mortem exam to the veterinarian as soon as possible, because the carcass will decompose rapidly in hot conditions. As with any animal health challenge consult your veterinarian to determine the best treatment and prevention plans for your herd.