

Dirty Jobs: Dehorning- Part 2

Paste Dehorning Details

This month we'll continue our discussion on how to make dehorning NOT the dirty job that it has always been made out to be. Paste dehorning is becoming more and more of a popular dehorning method because it is easier on both humans and cattle. However, there are some "tricks of the trade" that are needed to make this method successful.

Why paste?

- Paste is less painful: University of British Columbia researchers found that calves dehorned with paste experience less pain than calves dehorned with a hot iron, even when a local anesthetic block was used.
- Paste is safer for us humans: Burns or even cuts are always a risk when burning or cutting horns off cattle. Although a chemical burn is possible with paste, it is easily avoided if gloves are worn when handling the paste. It's also a much less physical job since calves are being handled when they are smaller and restraint is much easier.
- Paste has high acceptance in the industry: Paste dehorning is in line with both the Dairy Calf and Heifer Associations Gold Standards as well as the American Veterinary Medical Association's Animal Welfare guidelines. Both these organizations recommend cautery dehorning at the earliest age possible.
- Paste is preferred by consumers: There's no smoke, no bawling and very little, if any resistance from the calf, which is what consumers like to see. And as the people who buy our products and pay our bills, their opinion does matter.



5 Basic Steps:

1. Clip away hair on and around the horn bud, leaving a clipped area of approximately 1.5-2 inches in diameter
2. Lightly brush horn bud with the pointy tips of paste tube or with a wire brush (if not using tube form) to cause some mild skin abrasion
3. Apply a thin layer of dehorning paste to each horn bud that is approximately nickel size
4. Cover each pasted area with a small piece of duct tape
5. Remove duct tape after ~1-2 hours





Why duct tape?

Applying duct tape to the pasted areas does two things. It helps keep good contact between the horn bud and the paste. It also keeps paste from running down the sides of a calf's face, potentially into their eyes or from smearing onto other parts of the calf's environment. Remove duct tape from calf after about 1-2 hours from being applied.

Timing

This is the most important paste dehorning tip! Paste works best on very young calves. Two days or younger is the most optimal time to paste dehorn calves. Calves that are older can figure out how to scratch their heads against something to rub the paste off or they can stand on three legs to scratch with the other. Also, the older the calf, the bigger the horn bud and the less likely the paste will be an effective dehorning tool. Applying paste to newborn calves right before or after colostrum feeding can reduce signs of any discomfort, since these calves are often in a "food coma" after receiving a gallon of colostrum.

Housing

Calves need to be protected from rain for 24 hours after the paste has been applied. Rain can cause the paste to run down the calf's face into their eyes leading to blindness. Group housed calves can also be tricky to dehorn with paste, since they may try to suck on each other and subsequently the paste. Pasting close to birth before calves enter the group pen may be the best option for these types of systems.

Restraint

When doing brand new calves that were just born and who are in a "food coma" sometimes no restraint is needed, they will simply stay laying down while you apply the paste. Some people have also had luck clipping horn buds and applying paste while the calf is nursing. And if you're dealing with calves that are little older who aren't this cooperative, an Easy-BZ works really well for restraint (see picture).



Paste Do's and Don'ts

- DON'T use too much paste!
- DON'T use on calves more than ~5 days old!
- If using on beef calves... DON'T put calves back with Mama right after pasting!
- DO clip the hair around the horn bud! (Short #40 blades works best)
- DO put duct tape over the top of paste!

Watch for next month's newsletter where we will discuss methods for pain management when dehorning cattle! In the meantime, happy dehorning to all!