

Benefits of feeding more liquid calories to calves

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“That’s not how we did it in the old days...” Have you ever heard this saying? How about in relation to feeding dairy calves? I know I have. However, there is a number of benefits to increasing the calories fed to calves, especially in the form of whole milk and milk replacer. You may hear this referred to as accelerated feeding programs. In addition, using step down weaning methods and increasing the amount of calf starter offered to calves before weaning is also beneficial and can ease the stress of weaning. In fact, some great research has found that the way we feed calves in the first 90 days will affect their adult milk production.

Conventional intakes of milk, or 2 quarts fed twice a day of a 20/20 milk replacer or whole milk, provide inadequate calories for optimal growth and health in calves, particularly in the stressful weather conditions of the Midwest. There are a number of studies that have shown benefits of feeding more milk, but perhaps the most significant results have found that calves fed 75% more than the conventional rate made significantly more milk in the first lactation. So if the conventional rate on the bag is 0.75 lb in 2 quarts of water fed twice a day (1.5 lb per day of milk powder), a calf on an increased plane of nutrition would receive approximately 2.6 pounds of milk replacer powder a day in 2 or 3 feedings. In fact, these cows fed greater rates of milk or milk replacer produced an additional 1,500 lbs of milk in the first lactation. Can you imagine if you did that 10 times? Twenty times? Fifty times?! That’s a lot of milk to sell and it’s only in her first lactation!

Some other things to consider when feeding higher rates of milk also include the following:

- Milk replacer/waste milk quality is important in achieving increased growth and production in lactation 1. Cheap is not always better.
- Adequate protein levels in calf starter are key for both pre and post weaning.
- Accelerated feeding programs have been shown to reduce age at first calving, decrease “non-completion” or cull rate before freshening, and can increase performance in lactation 1.
- Monitor your growth! Focus on doubling birth weight by weaning.
- Utilize stepdown weaning for calves fed accelerated feeding programs. Often this will include calves being fed milk once a day for 1 week before weaning.