

Calf Weaning

There is a lot written about calf rearing systems, where almost from birth the calf is fed supplements, other than milk, to develop the rumen and allow early weaning on to grass. The rumen is the largest of the four stomachs and digests fibre by fermentation, and it makes economic sense to establish grass feeding as early as possible.

To assist this there are a variety of calf nuts and muesli like products to help get the calf through the transition period, from milk to grass, which is about from three weeks to three months of age. It all crashes down though if the calf is weaned off milk and high energy feeds, on to poor quality grass and the rumen is not yet developed enough to digest it.

Because every year is different climate wise, the available grass is going to vary from year to year so a feeding regime that worked well last year won't necessarily work this year. There is also variation between spring and autumn reared calves, with autumn born calves being weaned into the middle of winter.

This is often where we come in. Unfortunately we see calves that are weaned onto rough pasture and sometimes only supplemented with poor hay. The calf struggles to digest this feed, and so it uses body fat and muscle as an energy source. The result is a skeletal looking calf with a big pot belly that is starving to death. It eventually sits down and is too weak to stand up.

The first thing is to treat all the secondary health problems that have come along such as worms. Then take a step back and reintroduce slowly the calf nuts to all the calves in the mob. You may have to keep them going until there is a good supply of quality grass. This may mean another three months of supplementary feeding. Expensive? Perhaps, but the results are healthy calves which grow on to be healthy adults.