

Separation and weaning of calves reared in cow-calf contact systems

Problem

Recently, the number of dairy farms practicing cow-calf-contact-systems for several weeks/months is increasing. This late separation of cow and calf can cause stress and therefore asks for specific strategies, because the natural weaning age would not be earlier than 8-10 months.

Solution

Separation and weaning of calf and cow should be done step by step and not earlier than 3 months after birth. Changes should not be abrupt.

Impact

Gradual separation and weaning will help to keep the stress for animals and humans as low as possible, to prevent weight losses of calves and milk ejection problems in cows.

Practical recommendation

The aim of gradual separation and weaning is to accustom the animals slowly to the new situation. This can be achieved by gradually reducing the amount of milk for the calf, gradually reducing the contact time between cow and calf, and by carrying out all upcoming changes step by step (separation, weaning, change of housing and feed).

Strategy 1: stepwise reduction of cow-calf contact

Calves are separated from the cows for longer time intervals or are allowed to be with the cows for shorter and less frequent periods. In systems with permanent cow-calf contact, the calves can be separated for a few hours at first, then gradually longer. In restrictive systems, this can be solved by allowing the weaning calves to suckle later than the younger ones or only once a day.

Strategy 2: first separation, then weaning

Calves are separated from their mother, but continue to receive milk: by teat buckets or automatic milk feeders or by a foster cow. Weaning is then done by gradually reducing the amount of milk. Weaning from the foster cow is possible by adjusting the duration of contact and the number of calves per foster cow. If calves are subsequently fed artificially, the calves should be accustomed to the artificial teat, e.g., by drinking the colostrum via a bottle or regularly offering additional milk in a teat bucket.

Strategy 3: first weaning, then separation

Calves stay with the cows for 1-2 weeks before separation, but can no longer suckle the udder. This works using nose flaps that reliably stick to the nose. Nose flaps should be used at maximum for one week in order to avoid injuries. Fence-line weaning, or pen partition (preventing suckling), enables visual and physical contact of calf and cow and can facilitate final separation as an intermediate step.

Further remarks:

- **Strategies 1 and 2 as well as 1 and 3 can be combined.**
- **Approximately 1-2 weeks should be allowed for all transition periods.**
- **If possible, calves should be weaned / separated as a group and not individually.**
- **The strategies should be adapted to the individual farm and animal.**



Picture 1 (left): Nose flap prevents sucking

Picture 2 (right): Foster cow with two calves

Further information

Video

- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VjBWjtc-UlA> (DE, subtitles: DE, EN, FR, PL)

Further readings

- <https://www.fibl.org/de/shop/1660-mother-bonded-calf-rearing> (technical guide, free downloads available in English, German, French, Italian and Polish)

Weblinks

- <https://www.thuenen.de/en/ol/projects/cattle-husbandry/more-time-with-the-mother-better-for-the-calf/> (EN)

About this practice abstract and ProYoungStock

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