

Separating calves can help reduce exposure to disease in dairy herds

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Separating calves from older animals is effective to reduce disease exposure to unweaned calves.

That's according to South Dakota Cooperative Extension Dairy Specialist Alvaro Garcia, who said that dairies have made improvements to their newborn calf practices, and the changes have dramatically improved their survival.

"Sometimes we hear of the general public getting concerned about the dairy-farm practice of separating the newborn calf from its mother immediately after calving," Garcia said. "But this is a routine step that is best for the calf. In fact, hand-raising calves takes time, requires additional labor, and uses separate facilities, so it is not something dairies do to save money or out of callous disregard for animal welfare."

Garcia said that in 1930s a comprehensive study at the Iowa State College found that more than 15 percent of the calves born alive were dead before weaning. "A 2007 study from the USDA found that only 7.8 percent of calves had died by weaning, showing the benefits of separating calves," said Garcia. "Calves need to be separated because scours and respiratory disease - the two primary killers of unweaned calves - happen more often when [cows](#) and calves share housing."

A study by Gul liksen from 2009 showed that calf mortality increases when calves share housing with cows during the first week of their lives, Garcia added. "Even when producers leave calves with their mother for

more than 24 hours post-calving, the increase in respiratory disease is high," Garcia said. "Separating calves is a practice that has doubled in use between 1991-2007, and now, 84.4 percent of calves born in the U.S. are not allowed to have physical contact with older animals."

Garcia said the 2007 USDA study suggested other points that may help at calving time and may influence [calf](#) mortality:

- More than 90 percent of dairies trained employees in calving intervention.
- Almost 75 percent of dairies washed the perineum area with soap and water, 82 percent used lubricant while assisting with delivery, and 87 percent wore obstetrical gloves.
- Almost 72 percent hand-fed colostrum to heifers, thus ensuring adequate intake and immunity to disease.
- Nearly 81 percent of calves had adequate to excellent passive transfer based on immunoglobulin levels in blood.

Provided by South Dakota State University

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