

Farm News March 2023

Monitoring Calf Growth Rates

By correctly implementing methods of monitoring calf growth rates, you can achieve target rates for breeding, keep the rearing process cost effective and spot underperforming calves early

Calf rearing, from birth to breeding, is an integrated process involving genetics, environment, husbandry, nutrition and disease prevention strategies. All of these separate parts need to be correctly implemented to allow the calf to grow at an efficient rate that is cost effective.

Benefits of monitoring growth rates

- Achieving target growth rates for breeding – females that are at target weight at 24 months old produce more milk in a lifetime, and more milk per day, as well as having fewer calving difficulties at the first parturition.
- Identifying underperforming calves – allowing for prompt intervention and further investigation into the cause or causes of underperformance eg, poor nutrition, environmental problems (stocking density, air movement, ambient temperature etc.) or disease problems

Methods of monitoring growth

- Weighing – this is best done using electronic scales (a set of weigh bars on a strong platform) as this produces the most accurate results. However, a weigh band (a tape that measures the girth directly behind the front leg) can also be used. This is useful up to weaning, but is less accurate in older animals.
- Withers height – either a height stick can be used put across the withers, or the animals can be measured against fixed height markers painted on a wall.

Whatever method is chosen, ideally the same person should perform the measuring each time to achieve consistency.

Daily live weight gains

This can be easily calculated using two weights and knowing the number of days separating the two figures.

For example, if a calf weighs 40kg at birth, 52kg at 2 weeks of age the daily liveweight gain is:

$$(52-40) \div 14 \text{ which equals } 0.86\text{kg/day}$$

Growth is more efficient in early life, preweaning, so aim for at least 0.9kg per day for the first 3 months followed by at least 0.7kg per day up to breeding at 14 months.



Setting targets

It's all very good collecting the raw data, but we need to be able to compare the data collected to targets that have been set for the farm, to know if the animal is performing well.

For example, the following table shows target weights at different ages (in months) when the target mature weight is 685kg (taken from AHDB monitoring dairy calf growth). The important point to note is the percentage of mature weight and percentage of mature height values are targets.

Age	Stage	Body Weight (kg)	% Mature Weight	% Mature Height
0	Birth	41	6	
1		55	8	
3	Post-Weaning	116	17	63
6		185	27	74
9	Puberty	274	40	
12		343	50	
14	Pre-Breeding	377	55	87
24	Pre-Calving	582	85	96
MW	Adulthood	685	100	

Table 1: Target weights at different ages

The most important one to meet is that heifers need to be at least 55% of their mature weight (or 87% of their mature height) at service when 14 months of age.

To achieve these targets, the calf has to grow at a minimum of 0.8kg per day up to adulthood. The way to determine farm specific targets is to weigh, or measure several third or fourth lactation cows in the herd that are 100 – 120 days in milk. The average of these figures is then your mature weight (MW) figure. The target percentages of mature weight or mature height in the above table can be used to calculate target body weights for your own herd.

For example, if the MW is 750kg then the target weight at breeding at 14 months is 55% of 750kg which equals 412kg. Please note that the target values are different for weighing and height measuring.

When to weigh or measure

The minimum number of times would be:

- At birth
- At weaning
- At 6 months
- Pre-breeding at 14 months

Ideally, the more times it is done the better, and preferably calves should be weighed every 2 weeks, pre-weaning. Then 2 weeks post-weaning, at 6 months, pre-breeding and pre-calving at 24 months.

The more that is done, the quicker any problems can be identified and addressed.

SHEEP SCAB



If sheep in your flock are rubbing themselves up against fence posts etc. it could be a sign of sheep scab.

Nibbling at themselves could mean your flock has sheep scab.



If your sheep seem dull and depressed, it may be sheep scab.

Call us as soon as you see any signs



TB WILDLIFE CAMERA

A wildlife camera is available on loan from the Farm Office for those who want to monitor badger activity on the farm. Please contact the Farm Office on 01889 567200 for more details.

TBAS visits can also be booked free of charge with one of our TBAS trained vets.



HUSKVAC

Lungworm can have a devastating impact on a herd's productivity and can affect animals of any age. Vaccinate prior to turnout to help ensure your herd is protected

- Lungworm is a UK-wide problem impacting cattle of any age which is mainly diagnosed in late summer/autumn.
- Lungworm impacts productivity of both beef and dairy systems with outbreaks being unpredictable.
- Definitive diagnosis and herd level infection status can be challenging to establish
- Vaccination is a predictable method of protecting a herd against lungworm and should be combined with controlled, effective anthelmintic use and grazing management as advised by your vet.

Contact the Farm Office on 01889 567200 to place your Huskvac orders or request more information

LAMBING ESSENTIALS

Lambing season is fast approaching and some of you may already be in full swing.

For those of you who haven't started just yet we have got it covered with a bucket containing the **Lambing Season Essentials Kit** with all of the essential items you will need for £58 ex VAT



FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Making the most from your Suckler Calves

This meeting covers the use of the MSD suckler herd performance checklist to aid benchmarking and drive performance

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Thursday, 30th March at 7.30pm

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Marchington Woodlands Village Hall
Tinkers Lane, Marchington Woodlands
ST14 8PF

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Free to attend

Light refreshments available

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Contact the Farm Office on 01889 567200 to book your place

