

Fact sheet

Calf and weaner nutrition following emergencies – best practice in the immediate/short-term



This fact sheet provides information for cattle producers when they need to feed calves and transition weaners to a diet of hay and grain/pellets or other supplements, assuming there's no paddock feed available. Producers are advised to also seek professional advice from a local animal nutritionist or veterinarian.

Calves (0–6 weeks and less than 60kg live weight)

What to feed

Feed electrolytes to dehydrated calves for at least 24 hours prior to putting them back onto milk.

Calves need 10% of their live weight in milk each day, until they reach a minimum of 60kg. Milk replacers should contain at least 20% true protein and 10% fat and no more than 10% starch and sugars.

Calves need constant access to grassy hay or straw in a hay ring/self-feeder to minimise wastage and contamination.

When to feed

Provide calf grain/pellets from one week of age onwards, allowing intake to slowly build as they get older. Note that a calf without a fully functioning rumen cannot digest urea, so blocks and supplements containing urea should not be fed. Urea can kill animals that don't have a functioning rumen.

Weaners (60–150kg live weight)

How to introduce to new feed

Animals need to be separated based on size to better match feeding requirements.

If the weaners have not previously been fed grain/pellets, ensure they have been full on hay for 2–3 days prior to introducing it.

Feed hay in rings/self-feeders if possible to minimise wastage and contamination. Allow adequate number of rings/feeders to keep them full and to avoid bullying.

In the case of the molasses and block/lick supplements, ensure that there's plenty of access and they're constantly available.

What to feed

Weaners require good quality hay and supplements immediately upon weaning to maintain an active rumen and maintain a positive growth rate.

Hay containing legume leaf is usually more nutritious and digestible than hay made from grass only, but too much legume content (e.g. pure lucerne hay) can cause scouring in weaners.

Feed grain/pellets if appropriate (Table 1), starting with a small amount (as per manufacturer guide) each day and then increasing to the desired level of intake over two weeks. After two weeks, they can be put onto self-feeders or fed out daily. Ensure the grain/pellets are appropriately buffered (check with a nutritionist).

How much to feed

It's best to allow each weaner 2–3kg of a good quality hay each day as a minimum and then provide grain/pellets or other supplements as required, depending on the age and weight range of the group.

Allow for 3–4m²/head in containment feeding (temporary feedlot) for a 100–200kg weaner and aim for high protein and low starch when possible.

Table 1: Supplement requirements for weaners of various ages and weights on two different hay qualities

Pasture quality	Orphan/poddy calf <i>0–6 weeks and <60kg</i>	Radical weaning <i><3 months and 60–100kg</i>	Early weaning <i>3–4 months and 100–150kg</i>	Normal weaning <i>5–8 months and >150kg</i>
Average quality hay (<55% DMD*, 7.5–8 MJ ME** and 7–10% CP***)	Milk replacer and calf grain/pellets	Calf grain/pellets	Calf grain/pellets	Protein supplements (dry licks, blocks and liquid supplements)
Good quality pasture (>55% DMD*, 8–9 MJ ME**, >10% CP***)	Milk replacer and calf grain/pellets	Calf grain/pellets	Fortified molasses	Hay only

*dry matter digestibility ** metabolisable energy ***crude protein

The information in this fact sheet has been sourced from [Weaner management in northern beef herds](#). MLA publication, April 2017.

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