

A survey of dairy calf management practices in Canada that affect animal welfare.

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Abstract

There is growing interest among the public in farm animal welfare and a need for methods to assess animal welfare on farm. A survey on calf rearing practices that might affect dairy calf welfare was performed via a 1-h interview on 115 dairy farms (mean $\pm$ SD: herd size=52.5 $\pm$ 20.9 cows; milk production=8,697 $\pm$ 1,153L) distributed throughout the province of Quebec. Despite frequent recommendations, many dairy producers continue to use management practices that increase the health risks of milk-fed calves. Major risk factors for poor calf welfare identified were 1) no use of calving pen in 51.3% of herds and low level of surveillance of calvings, especially at nighttime (once every 12h), 2) no disinfection of newborn's navel in 36.8% of herds, and delayed identification and, hence, calf monitoring (3 d), 3) 15.6% of farms relied on the dam to provide colostrum and none checked colostrum quality or passive transfer of immunity, 4) dehorning and removal of extra teats proceeded at late ages (6.4 wk and 6.7 mo, respectively) and without adequate pain control, 5) use of traditional restrictive milk feeding and waste milk distributed to unweaned calves without precaution in 48.2% of herds, 6) abrupt weaning performed in 16.5% of herds, and 7) calves housed individually in 87.9% of herds, and most inappropriate housing systems (crate=27.0%, tie-stall=13.9%, attached against a wall=5.7%) remained. This risk factor assessment was the first step in an intervention strategy to improve calf welfare on dairy farms.

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