

Paired Calf Housing and Group Housing

Farmers are encouraged to consider group or paired housing systems to rear calves from the day they are removed from the cows. Calves are highly motivated to engage in social behaviour with other calves. Almost all the benefits associated with group housing can be achieved by pairing of calves. Research has shown that providing social contact early in life provides numerous welfare benefits such as:

- Better adaptation to changes in their environment such as reduced stress at weaning.
- Improved solid food intake before and after weaning.
- Improved weight gain during and after mixing with unfamiliar calves.
- Less vocalisation.
- Better social adjustment in a herd situation.

If group housing is not possible then paired calf housing can be considered, since it would be more practical and cheaper to implement in most rearing systems.

Paired housing is the practice of housing two calves of the same age together during the milk feeding period.

The advantages of paired housing cannot be obtained by limiting social contact to visualisation or touch through a barrier.

The simplest way to implement paired housing is to merely combine 2 indoor calf pens or by placing two separate hutches next to each other with a small fenced area in front that allows the 2 calves to physically interact. Each calf should have at least the same amount of space as they previously had individually.

Paired housing can be initiated within the first week after birth.

Only pair healthy calves.

Normal calf management principles still apply. Such as adequate colostrum supply, vaccinations, perfect hygiene through consistent cleaning and disinfection and good climate conditions.

To avoid the spread of infectious diseases, any calves showing signs of illness should be separated and treated separately until healthy before being reintroduced into paired housing.

Paired housing increases the risk of cross sucking. If cross sucking is observed, increase the milk ration to avoid hunger, since hunger is a big motivator to suckle. It is recommended to feed calves 20% of bodyweight per day in divided feedings to prevent hunger and obtain optimal growth. Providing dry teats for the calves to suck on between feedings may also help.

Ensure that both calves can drink from their own teat at the same time. If bullying at feeding time is a problem, provide a barrier between teat buckets to prevent one calf from butting the other calf off its teat.