



SHOW SOLUTIONS

How to avoid digestive issues in show cattle

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Finishing a calf by show time can be one of the most rewarding experiences — but maintaining the calf's digestive health is the key to success. When a digestive upset occurs, cattle will go off feed, resulting in reduced weight gain on their end and frustration on yours.

Before getting into how to avoid digestive issues, it is important to understand the causes and symptoms related to them. A couple of the more common digestive issues that can cause problems with inconsistent feed intake are bloat and acidosis.

What is bloat?

Bloat is a condition in which excessive gas accumulates in the rumen (the largest chamber of the cow's four-chambered stomach) and can lead to reduced feed intake and, if left unattended, even death. The main gases produced in the rumen through the natural process of fermentation of feed are carbon dioxide and methane. These gases are typically belched out; however, there are instances in which the normal process is interrupted and, as a result, gas accumulates. The primary sign of bloat is that the calf will look extremely full, almost like there is a balloon under its skin, on the left side of its abdomen. The calf may also appear uncomfortable and do things like kick at its belly or experience labored breathing and/or frequent urination or defecation.

There are two different types of bloat. The first type of bloat is free-gas bloat. Factors that cause free-gas bloat include any type of blockage or impairment in the esophagus that prevents the animal from belching. The second — and most common — type of bloat is frothy bloat. This type of bloat causes a foam or froth to build up in the rumen, trapping the gas in tiny bubbles and making it impossible for the calf to belch. Frothy bloat occurs when animals graze lush alfalfa or clover fields or eat high-quality alfalfa hay, or when calves eat large amounts of carbohydrates or grains or consume grains that are ground too finely. When calves eat too much grain too fast or eat grains ground to a smaller-than-optimal size, the microbes that live in the rumen begin to produce gas at a rate that is too fast for the calf to keep up with removing.

What is acidosis?

Acidosis, or grain overload, is a digestive disorder in which the calf consumes too much of a highly fermentable carbohydrate, such as corn, causing the rumen microbes to produce too much acid too quickly and leading to symptoms that resemble a bellyache. Factors that contribute to acidosis include rapidly switching cattle from forage to high-grain diets; rapid intake of high-quality forages; insufficient fiber in the diet; weather changes, both hot and cold; illness/injury; a previous bout of acidosis; and transportation.

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Calves that are suffering from acidosis will have reduced feed intake and gain (no interest in feed), little to no rumination or “chewing their cud,” and diarrhea, and they may be at an increased risk of lameness. Care should be taken to examine calves thoroughly when they exhibit the symptoms outlined above, as an animal with respiratory disease can exhibit similar symptoms and may require antibiotic intervention.

How to avoid acidosis and bloat

- **Do your homework** regarding which feed you want to give your show calf prior to purchase, and stay on that feed throughout the duration of your time with your calf. Being consistent with the calf's feed will promote consistent feed intake, increased weight gain and a reduced risk of digestive upsets. Show-Rite cattle feeds take nutrition to the next level by including yeast products that promote gut stability, as well as Bio-Mos, which increases nutrient absorption and binds Salmonella and E. coli. These added benefits result in a healthier digestive system.
- **Practice good management.** After reading the causes of bloat and acidosis, we can conclude that cattle do not like big changes. Take time to talk to the seller and discover what the calf has been eating prior to purchase. If you are unable to purchase that particular brand of feed, ask the seller if you can have some feed to bring home with you. Start the calf on the feed it was fed previously, then slowly begin mixing in your preferred feed until you have the calf switched. If your calf has not received grain yet, allow the calf to eat only grass hay on the first day. When starting your calf on feed, begin by feeding it grain at 1% of its body weight per day. Increase the amount of grain by a half-pound per day over the next 2 to 3 weeks, until the calf is on full feed. You can expect heifers to consume 1.5–2% of their body weight in grain and for steers to consume about 2.5% of their body weight in grain. The main point of slowly increasing grain in the diet is to decrease the risk of acidosis and bloat. This concept should be considered during any dietary changes as you feed your calf.
- **Consider forage.** Most show feeds are designed to contain all of the nutrients your calf will need, except for hay. Calves on a good-quality show feed do not need to be fed a high-quality hay to grow. Find a good medium-quality hay that contains around 10–12% crude protein. Remember: Cattle were originally designed to consume roughage, so we need to make sure there is still roughage in their diet to maintain their gut health.
- **Weigh your feed.** Don't guess — weigh the feed daily. An overconsumption of grain or carbohydrates can lead to acidosis and/or bloat, and if that happens, you are back to having an animal that does not want to eat.
- **Establish a routine.** Feed the calves their grain twice daily, and stay within 30 minutes of those same feeding times every day. This will promote a more consistent intake and will keep feed fresher for your calf. This holds true whether your calf is at home or at a show. Cattle prefer consistency, and maintaining consistency with their feeding times will reduce their risk for digestive issues.

Preventing digestive issues in calves is the key to having a successful year. Remember to feed your calves the correct amount and type of grass hay with their grain, make any diet changes slowly, and stay consistent with feeding your calf; doing all of this will help reduce the risk of an upset stomach. Good luck!

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