

Are You Ready for Winter?

By Charles E. Gardner, DVM, MBA

“These two calves seemed just fine this morning. They jumped up and drank all their milk as soon as I fed them. I was shocked to come out just after noon and find them dead. What could have happened to them?” These words came from one of my clients following three days of extremely cold weather.

I performed autopsies on both calves, and found they were extremely thin, with no fat reserves. Their thick haircoat concealed this from casual observation. They drank their milk eagerly, desperate for some energy.

Because of their small size, young calves lose body heat much faster than larger animals. They also have relatively little fat reserves when first born. If temperatures dip below freezing, be sure that your young calves have six to eight inches of clean, dry straw beneath them. Make sure they have shelter from the wind around them. At the same time, they need fresh air to breathe. Hutches work very well to fill this bill, but so can other forms of housing. If you are using “kennels,” consider placing plywood three or four feet above the floor at the rear to give the calf more protection.

All animals will use energy to maintain body temperature when the thermometer drops, and therefore, they need more energy in their diet. Baby calves again need top priority. If you are using milk replacer, be sure it is at least 20% fat. If temperatures get below ten degrees, consider adding an extra feeding to calves on milk.

Older calves and heifers will do well if they have clean, dry bedding as well as protection from wind, rain, and snow. They also need fresh air. Sometimes buildings are closed up too tight to keep pipes from freezing, and pneumonia in the animals develops. If the air in the building smells foul, ventilation needs to be improved. The worst air is often right above the floor, so get down on your knees to see how the air is at that level. That is what the animals breathe when they lay down.

One danger to milking cows in severe cold is frozen teats when they leave the parlor. You may need to dry teats to remove the dip from them before releasing cows to the outside. Talk to your veterinarian about the best dip to use over the winter months. An additional factor to consider is the possibility that water sources may freeze during cold weather. Check on all animals to be sure that they are getting water.

Because respiratory disease is more common with cold or changing weather, it is important that all animals are properly vaccinated. Now is a good time to discuss vaccinations with your veterinarian. You can also review treatment protocols if animals do become ill.

As we see the falling leaves and note frost on the ground some mornings, we cannot escape the fact that cold weather is coming soon. Are you ready for it? Dairy animals generally cope better with cold than with heat, but some precautions are needed, especially with baby calves.