

Walking the Calf Barn: What to Look for

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A lot can be learned from a simple walk through your calf barn, but how do you know what to look for? Here is a simple checklist to help you better read your calves. Remember, when walking through your calf pens, start with the youngest animals first and move through pens from youngest to oldest so that the risk of disease transmission from older to younger animals is diminished.

1. **Demeanor:** How are your calves acting? Healthy calves should be interested in each other and you. If you notice calves that are away from their pen-mates (usually staying in the corners, against walls, or along fencing) there may be something wrong. Calves that don't scurry as you approach them and cross into their flight zone usually need further evaluation for possible health issues.
2. **Eyes:** Calves eyes should be clear with no tears or discharge running down her face.
3. **Ears:** Ears should be carried straight and move with environmental sound. There should be no discharge or ear drooping. Drooping ears can be a sign of illness, but can also be caused by a heavy ear tag. Be sure to consider other factors before assuming illness from droopy ears.
4. **Nose:** Mucus discharge from the nose is a sign of respiratory illness. A wet nose is fine but snotty discharge is not.
5. **Respiration:** Take note of calves that appear to be breathing faster/slower than those around her. Listen for wheezing or rasping noises which may be indicative of a respiratory infection.
6. **Navels:** Swelling around the navel can indicate either infection or an umbilical hernia. Infection is more common and can be prevented by proper umbilical care at birth by using iodine to completely submerge and coat the umbilical stump.
7. **Joints:** Swelling in the joints, especially the knees, is often related to navel infections and can develop weeks after initial infection. If swollen joints are common consider improving your calf care procedure at birth. Again, dipping the umbilical stump in iodine until thoroughly coated can help prevent infections. Spraying with iodine will not provide the same protection.
8. **Manure:** When looking in the pen, spot fresh manure and check the consistency. Watery feces may mean the calf is sick while hard feces may point to a need for more water.
9. **Tail:** So you spotted watery manure, but who did it come from? Looking at the tail should give you a good indication of who has diarrhea. The tail should be dry, calves with tails that are wet or coated in manure are generally the ones with the upset tummies.
10. **Hair Coat:** Sick calves don't have shiny hair coats. Often, sick calves have a shaggy appearance with a dull coat that may appear off-colored.

While some of these are better indicators of health than others, collectively they may help to tell the story of what is happening. Catching health issues early can help you get your calves back on track. Keep in mind that healthy calves grow up to be healthy cows!

For a great tool for monitoring calf health and determining when intervention is necessary, see the Calf Health Scoring Chart from the University of Wisconsin–Madison's School of Veterinary Medicine:

https://www.vetmed.wisc.edu/dms/fapm/fapmtools/8calf/calf_health_scoring_chart.pdf