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Using a Colostrometer - Some Guidelines For Proper Use

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Most of us have seen the recommendation that the "quality" of colostrum that is fed to newborn calves should be measured with a device known as a "colostrometer."

This is a very simple instrument designed to float in a sample of colostrum. The instrument is designed to measure the density (the exact term is "specific gravity") of the colostrum. Research has shown that colostrum that is of a certain density will have, on average, a certain concentration of that all-important IgG that helps protect the calf against infectious organisms.

In "good" colostrum, the colostrometer floats higher in the colostrum sample than it does in "poor" colostrum. This is where care needs to be taken in the use of the colostrometer. There are three possible ways to get a reading that is wrong:

Some colostrum has millions (or maybe billions) of very tiny air bubbles trapped in it. Many times, these cannot be seen. But, when you put the colostrometer in the sample of colostrum, the colostrometer sinks very far down, or actually just falls through the sample and hits the bottom of the sample tube - sometimes with enough force to break the colostrometer! Now, assuming the instrument did not break, you must wait for the air to work its way out of the fluid. Sometimes a wait of 10 to 20 minutes is required. As the air leaves the sample of colostrum, the colostrometer will very slowly rise in the sample. You must check the level (or reading) of the colostrometer from time to time to be able to know when the colostrometer has quit rising in the sample.

Some colostrum contains heavy concentrations of "sticky" substances. These substances work to prevent the colostrometer from sinking into the sample of colostrum in the "normal" manner. Again, you must wait for the colostrometer to sink to the "real" level. This can take as little as a minute or two, or it may take 10 minutes. If you do not wait long enough, the colostrometer will indicate that the colostrum is of higher (or much higher) quality than it actually is, with the result that you will feed poorer quality colostrum to a calf than is indicated by the scale reading.

The colostrometer scale reading is the level on the colostrometer scale that meets the top surface of the sample of colostrum. If the top surface of the sample of colostrum has foam floating on it, then the actual reading on the colostrometer will be obscured. The reading taken on the top surface of the foam will be less than the correct reading. Thus, care must be taken to remove all of the foam from the top of the colostrum sample before reading the colostrometer scale.

To convince yourself of the need to leave the colostrometer in the sample for 10 minutes "just to be sure," on the next 30 samples of colostrum, write down the numerical reading on the colostrometer scale as soon as you put the instrument into the colostrum sample. Then wait 10 minutes (set a timer!), be sure you remove all the foam from the surface, then read the numerical

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