Group Housed Dairy Calves - why might you consider it; the pros and cons

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Group Housing has been a way of feeding calves for as long as we have had domestic cows
- Very common in some countries where seasonal calving systems are used
- Always an option

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In the US – generally concerned with individually housing calves
- Isolation for reduced disease transfer
- Individual feeding and care
- Emphasis on individual
  - Health care
  - Feed intake
  - ADG
  - Weaning age
  - Rumen development

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Group Housing and Feeding Systems for liquid fed calves
- Gang/mob feeders
- Ad-lib feeders; milk barrels/milk lines
- Automated systems

Try to achieve the same response that we get with individually housed calves but in a group environment

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Gang/mob feeders
- Group fed
- Often fed twice a day
- Using waste/whole milk
- Fed traditional levels of milk
- Often done to reduce labor/feeding time

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Gang or mob feeders
- Work best with similar age calves
- Often used with large numbers of calves
- Can also be 2-4 calves per group
- Management is difficult but can work well
- Individual ADG may be compromised
**Ad libitum feeders**

- Group fed, multiple calves at a time
- Milk lines (high or low)
- Milk barrels/trolleys
- Fed more commonly with milk replacer
- Some use waste/whole milk
- Some use an acid to reduce bacteria
- Often done to reduce labor/feeding time
- Need heated areas in winter

**Automated calf feeding**

- Group fed using a single milk feeding station
- Up to 25 calves per nipple

**Ad libitum feeders**

- Often used for increased intake and ADG
- Prefer to have calves suckling/eating as they desire and not 2 meals per day
- Need to keep calf size/age as similar as possible
- Daily cleaning is needed
- Requires calves to be trained—often 1-2 days
- Weaning/grain intake/rumen development may be difficult

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Automated calf feeding

- Changes labor level
- Must manage calves and the system
- System must be cleaned once per day
- Often requires a new building or major renovation

General Recommendations

- Age to start calves
  - Depends on system you choose
  - Ad lib vs. group on a single nipple
- Training
  - 2-14 days
- Stocking rate
  - Depends on bedding system and ventilation
- Milk amount/meal size
  - 2 liters per meal
- Meals per day - 2-4

General Recommendations

- Health stress will be greater with group housed calves
- Colostrum management is important - even more important
- Use a colostrometer to measure colostrum IgG levels
- Those 15% of poor colostrum

General Recommendations

- Suggest measuring blood total protein on calves to minimize failure of passive transfer of antibodies

General Recommendations

- Choose your desired system along with desired feeding rate
- Calves on higher feeding rate will consume more free choice water

General Recommendations

- Watch for cross-sucking
- May want to maximize early growth yet without compromising dry feed intake and rumen development
- Adopt health protocols to meet your system
- Cleanliness/bedding management is critical
Group housing for dairy calves

- Use resources that are available for getting ideas and management
- Focus on what level of management you want for your calves
- Match management and feeding level with the system that you choose or design