

Feeding behaviour and weaning of milk-fed dairy calves

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Agriculture and
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Canada

In North America, dairy calves are typically

- separated from their mother at birth
- raised in individual housing until weaned off milk
- fed milk or milk replacer at 8-10% BW/d in two meals from a bucket
- weaned off milk at 6-8 weeks of age
- mortality rate 8-12% before weaning



Issues

1. Early care of calves: colostrum intake, heat lamp
2. How much milk to feed
3. Predicting illness with automated milk feeders
4. Weaning off milk

Sucking motivation of the newborn and colostrum intake

- Sucking motivation of newborn and colostrum intake

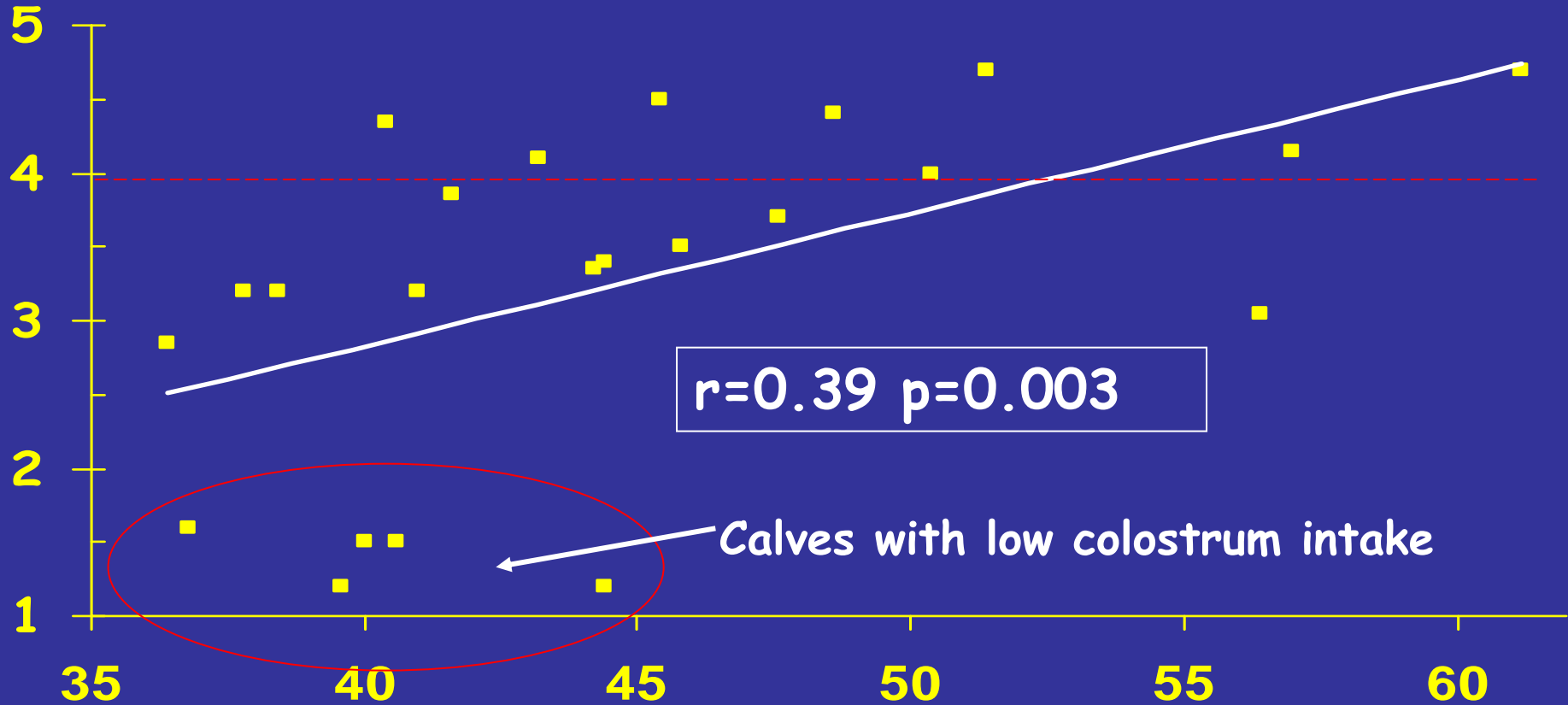
- no effect of time since birth (2h versus 6h) or of heat lamp

- effects of body weight and calf vigour



Motivation to ingest colostrum at first meal varies between calves and is related to birth weight

Colostrum drunk (L)



$r=0.39$ $p=0.003$

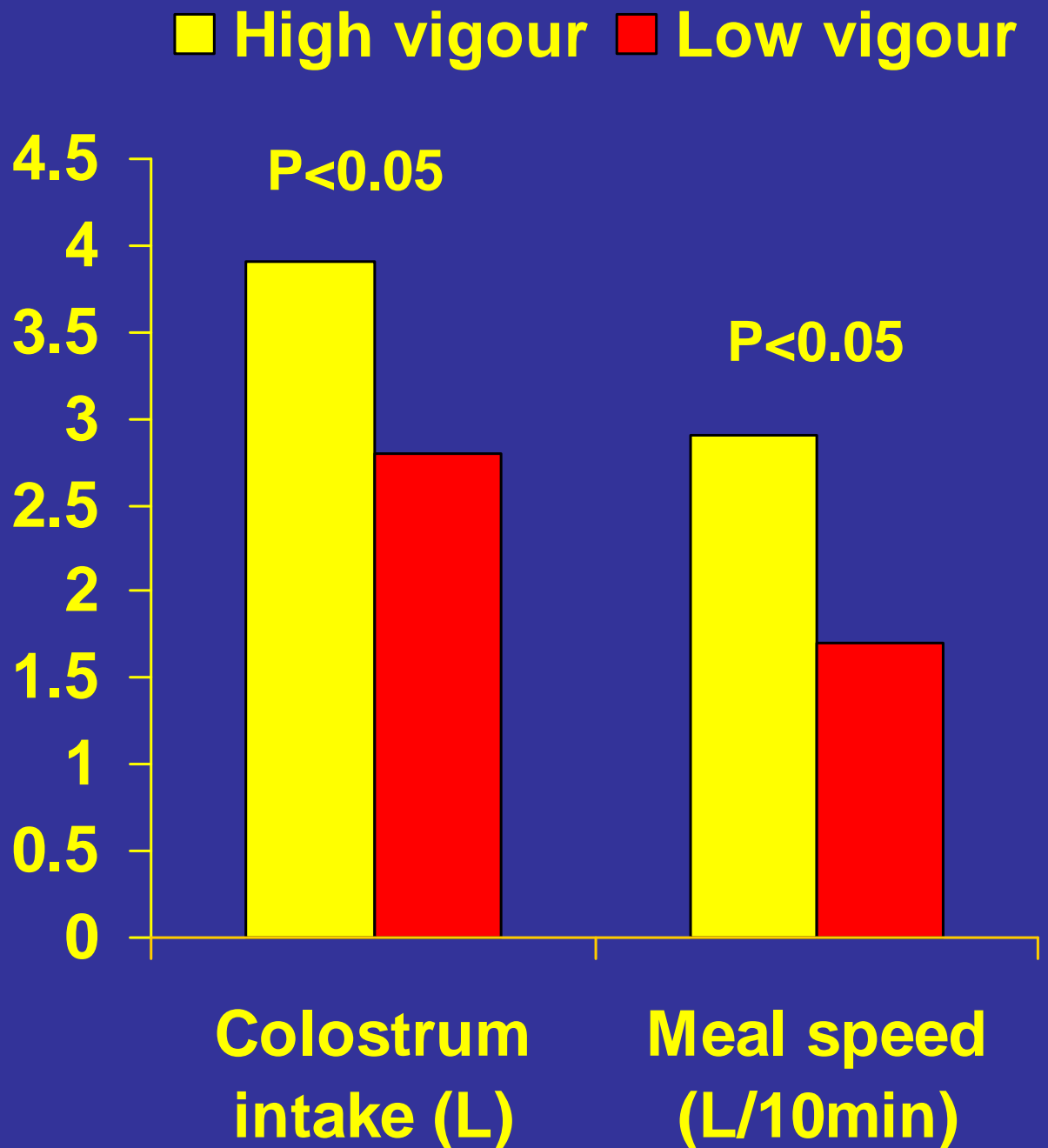
Calves with low colostrum intake

Birth weight (kg)

High calf vigour at birth led to increased colostrum intake and drinking speed

High vigour $\geq 55\%$ of first hour after birth standing

Low vigour $< 55\%$ of first hour after birth standing



Do calves need an external source of heat ?

Low temperatures

- Increase mortality
- Increase protein degradation
- Impair absorption of IG from colostrum
- Increase pneumonic lesions

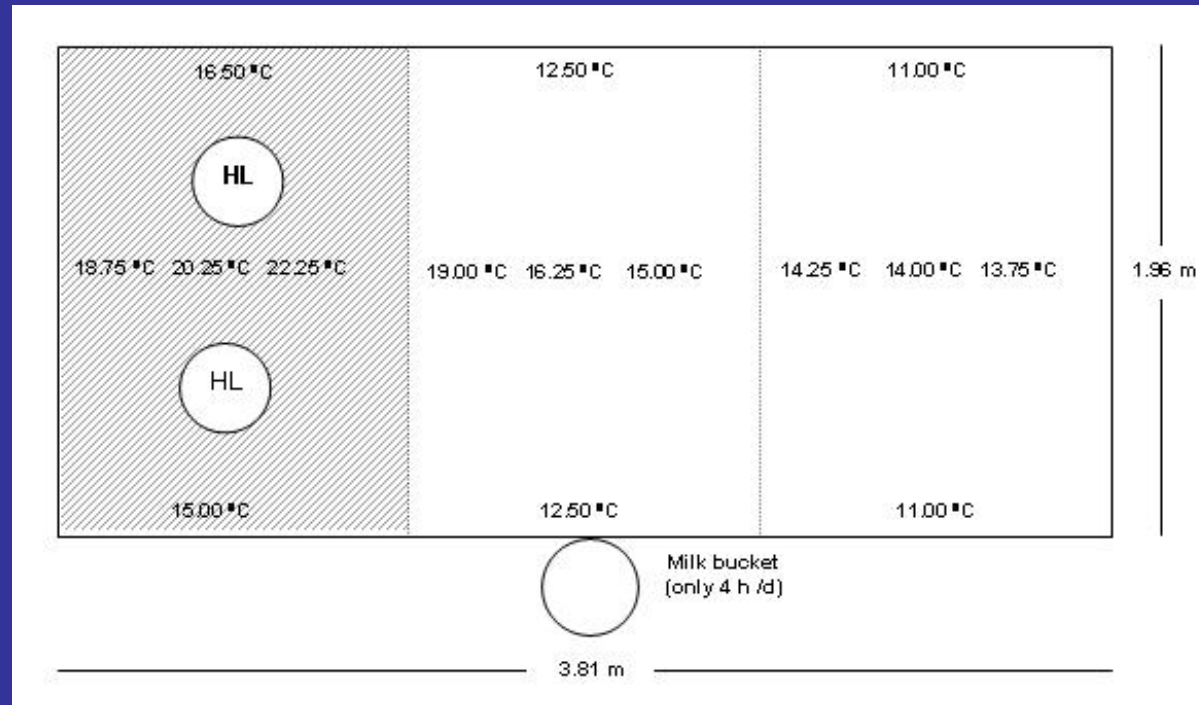


Do calves recognize and use an external source of heat?



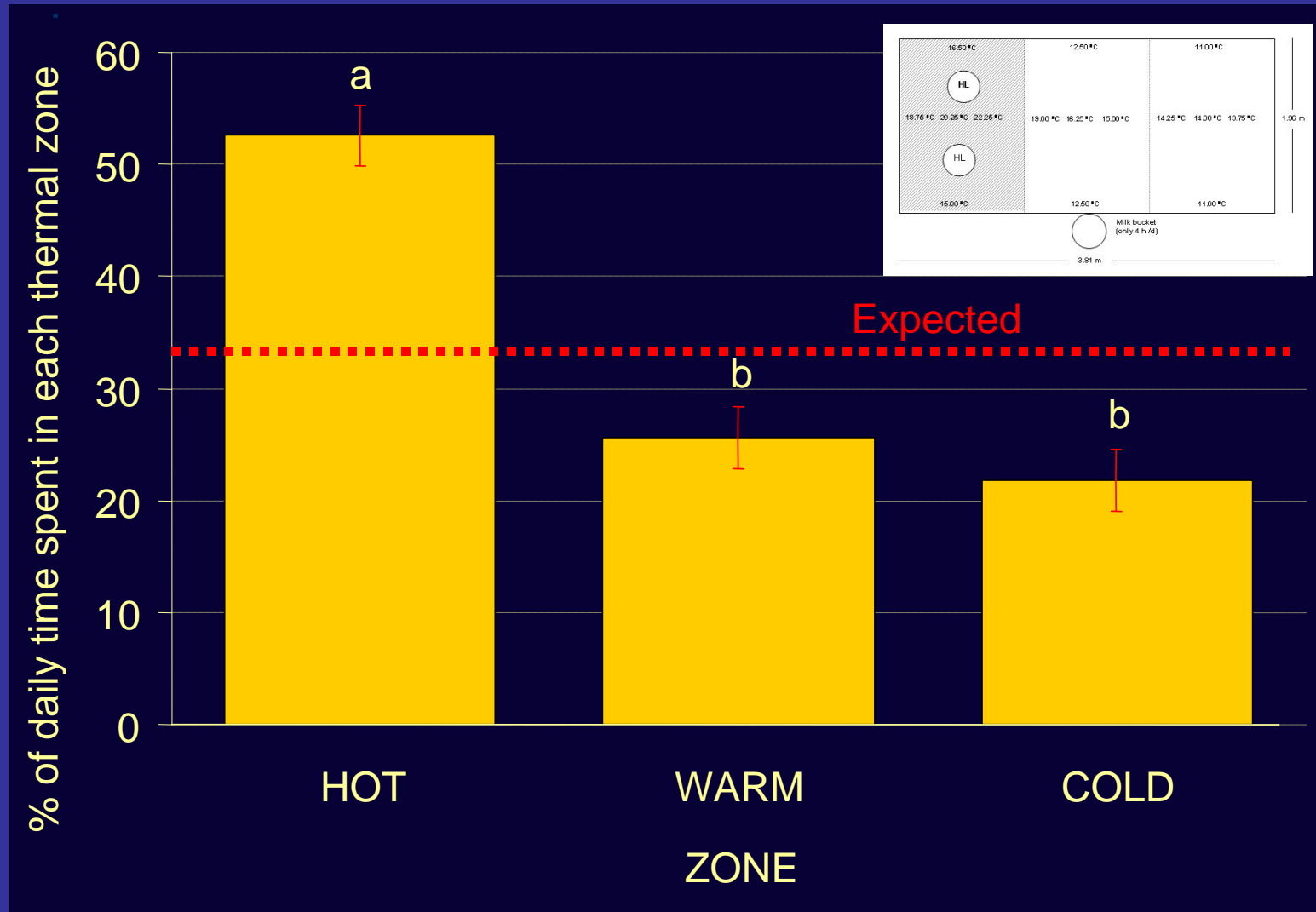
Borderas, T.F., A.M.B. de Passillé, and J. Rushen. 2009. Temperature preferences and feed level of the newborn dairy calf. *Appl. Anim. Behav. Sci.* D.08-291

Preference test layout



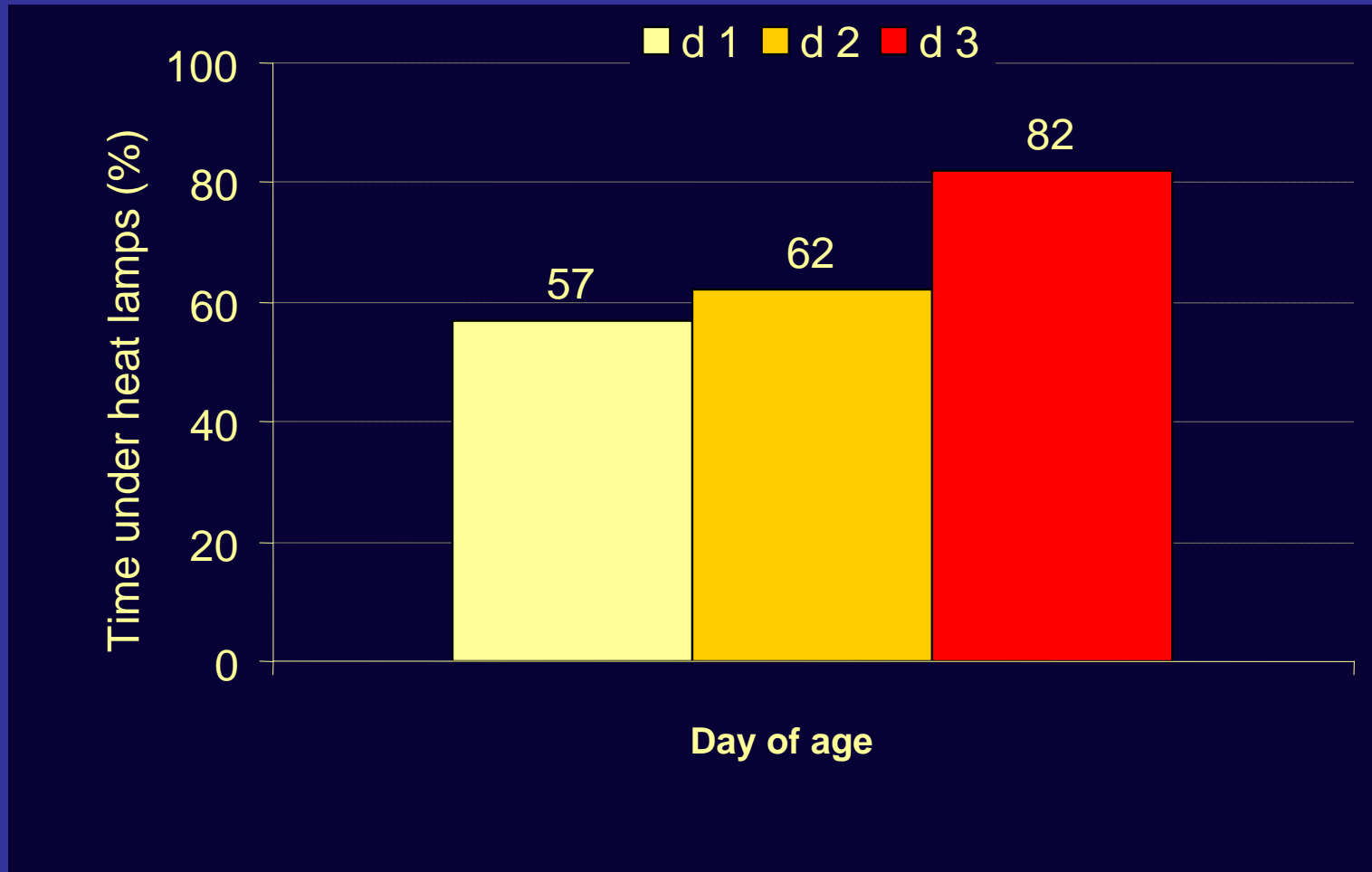
Borderas, T.F., A.M.B. de Passillé, and J. Rushen. 2009. Temperature preferences and feed level of the newborn dairy calf. *Appl. Anim. Behav. Sci.* D.08-291

Calves prefer heat



Borderas, T.F., A.M.B. de Passillé, and J. Rushen. 2009. Temperature preferences and feed level of the newborn dairy calf. *Appl. Anim. Behav. Sci.* D.08-291

Calves use heat source more as they age



Borderas, T.F., A.M.B. de Passillé, and J. Rushen. 2009. Temperature preferences and feed level of the newborn dairy calf. *Appl. Anim. Behav. Sci.* D.08-291

An external source of heat could help identify ill calves

Even well fed calves (30 % BW) show a strong preference for an external source of heat



Temperature recording



Borderas, T.F., A.M.B. de Passillé, and J. Rushen. 2009. Temperature preferences and feed level of the newborn dairy calf. *Appl. Anim. Behav. Sci.* D.08-291

How much milk should
we feed?

What is "natural", biological?



Conventional feeding

- fed milk at 4-6L/d
 - grow about 0.5kg/d
 - weaned off milk at 6-8 weeks of age



Nursing from cow

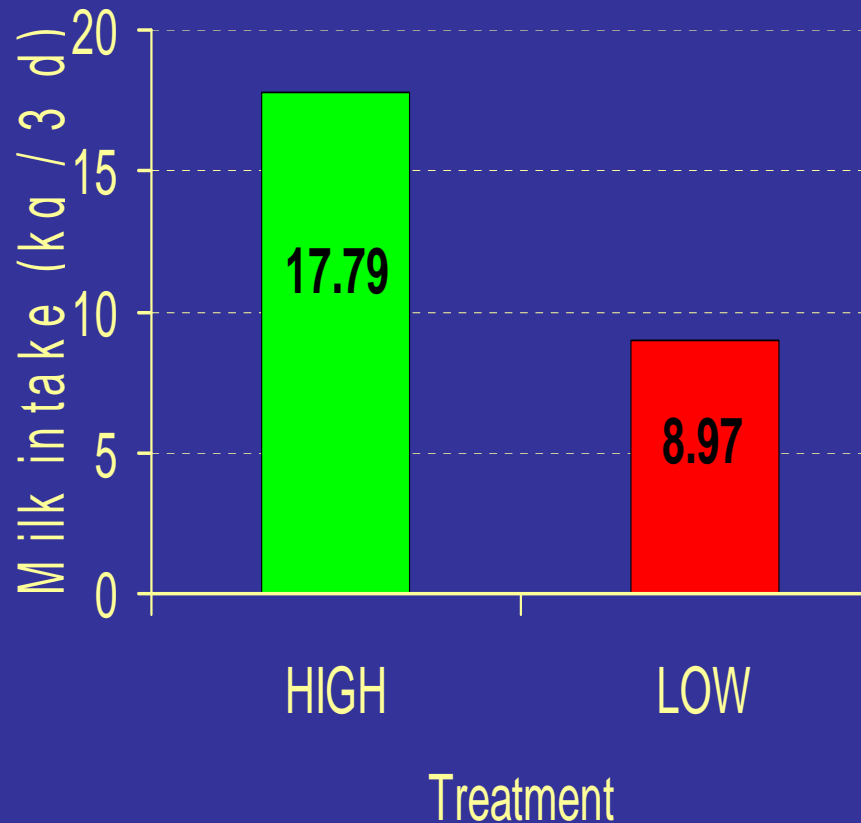
- drink 8-12L/d of milk,
 - grow about 1kg/d
 - are weaned at 8-10 months of age



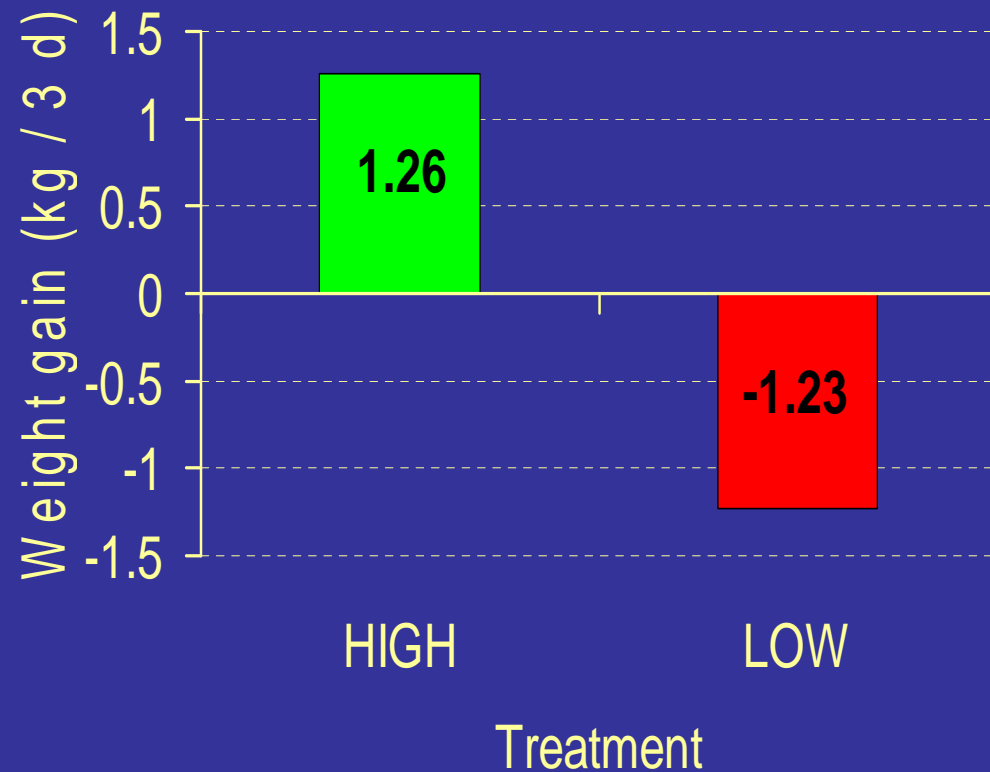
de Passillé, A.M.B., Rushen, J. (2006) *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 101 264-275.

Conventional feeding during the first 3d of life leads to weight loss

Milk intake kg/3d



Weight gain kg/3d

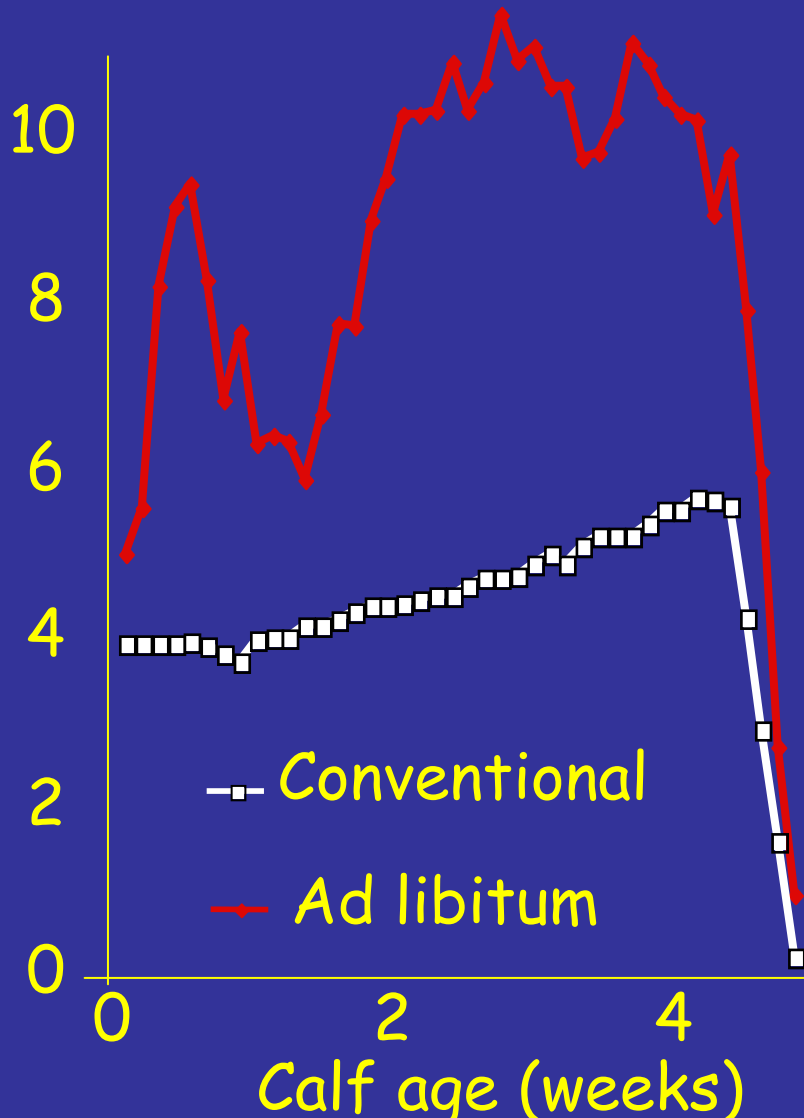


Borderas, T.F., A.M.B. de Passillé, and J. Rushen. 2009. Temperature preferences and feed level of the newborn dairy calf. *Appl. Anim. Behav. Sci.* D.08-291

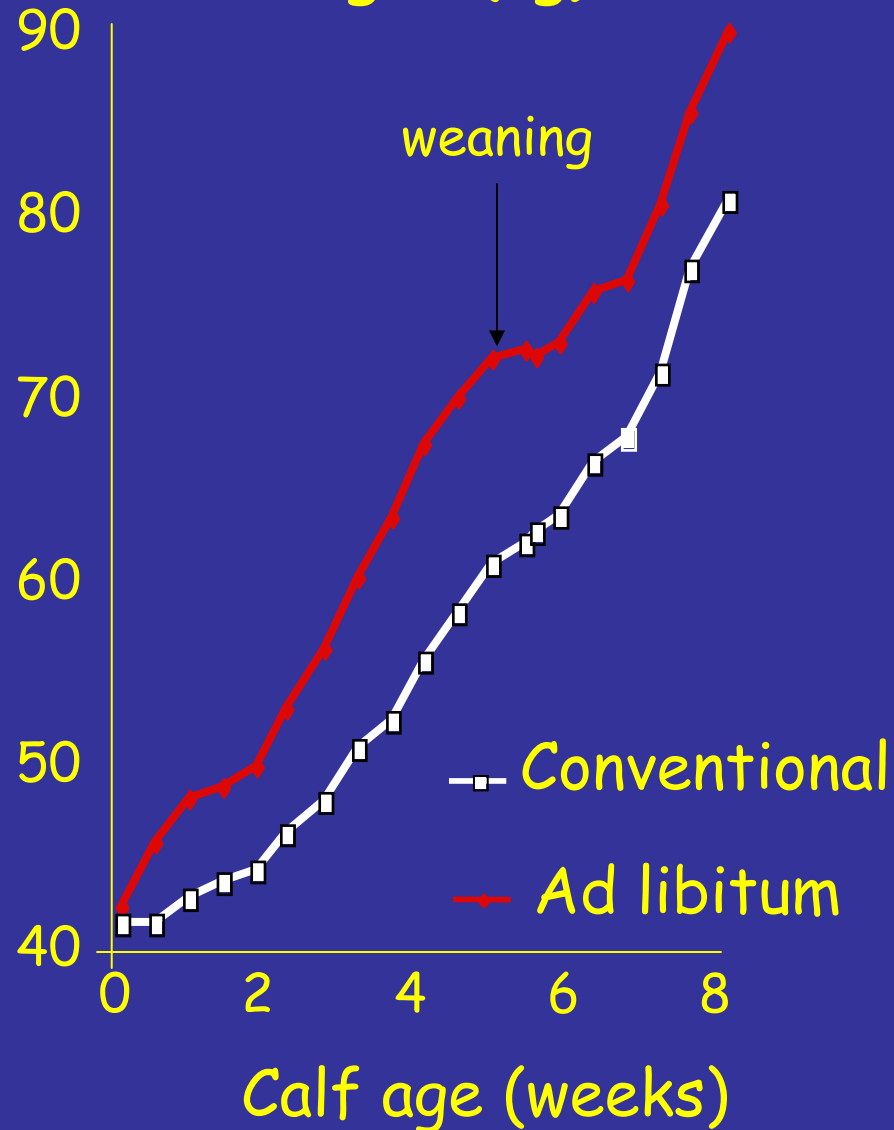


Ad lib milk feeding of dairy calves

Milk consumed (kg/d)



Calf weight (kg)

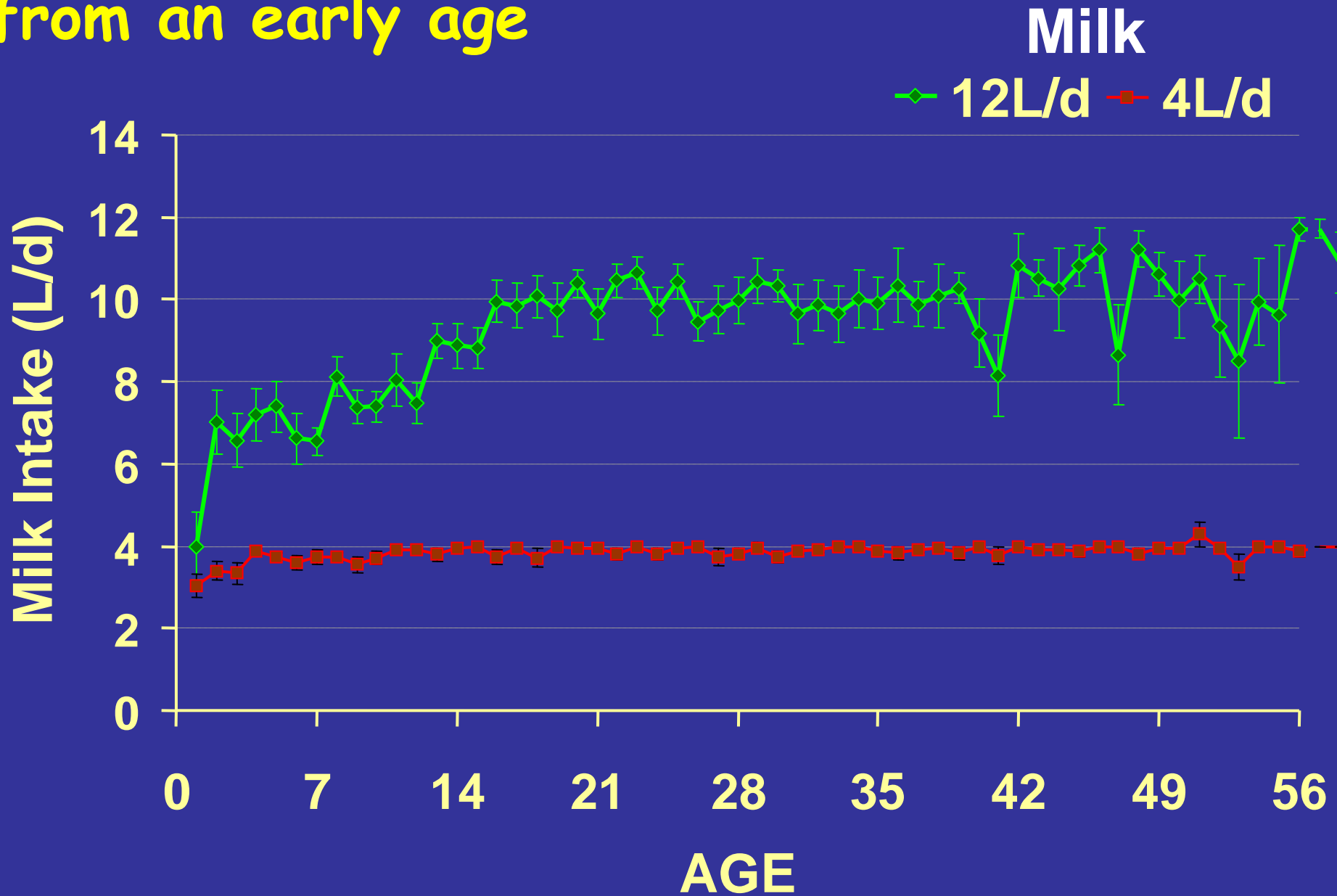


Compared feeding and growth of calves fed either 12L/d of milk or 4L/d of milk from an automated milk feeder

Borderas, T.F., A.M.B. de Passillé, and J. Rushen. 2009. Feeding behavior of calves fed small or large amounts of milk. J. Dairy Sci.



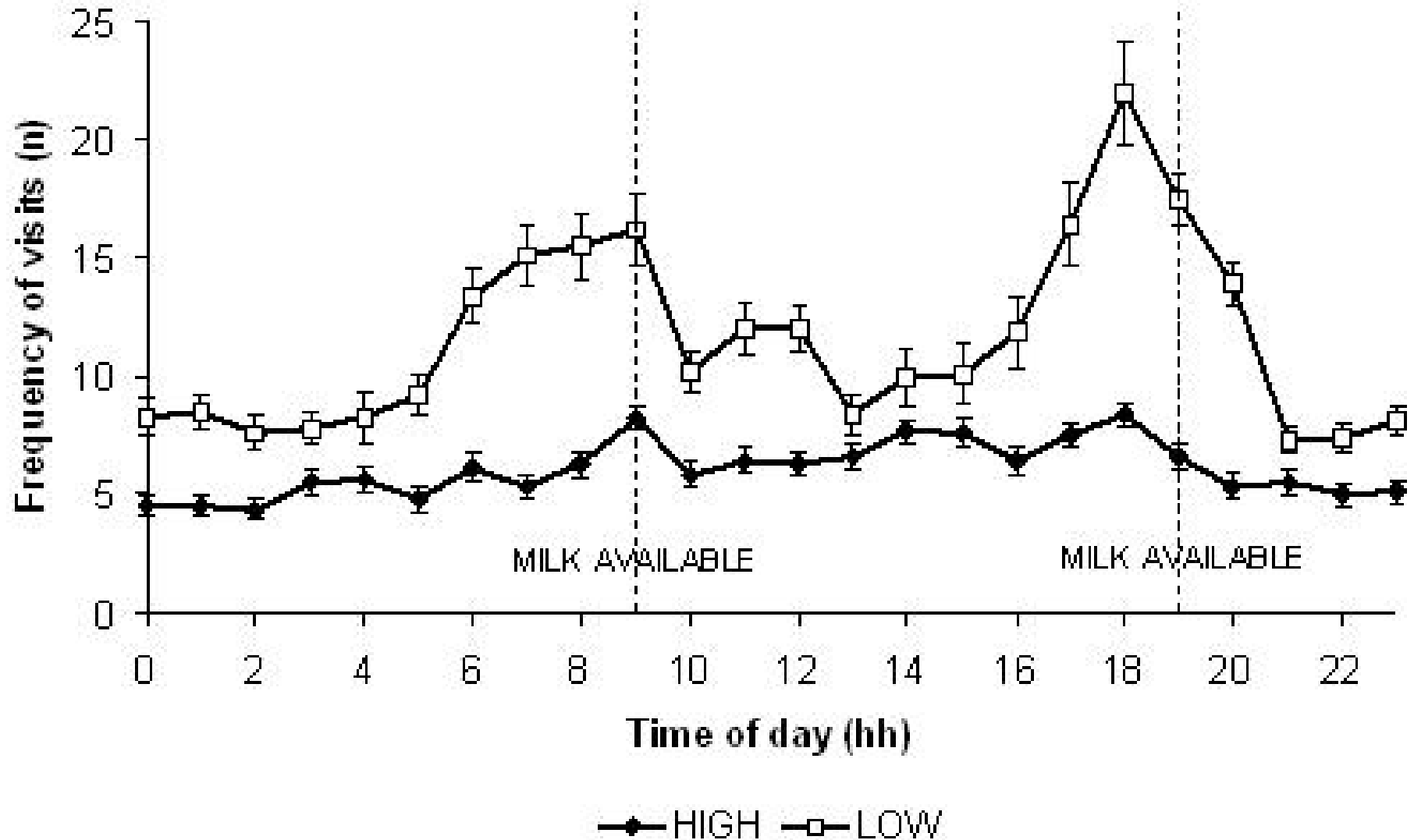
Calves drink large volumes of milk even from an early age



Calves fed large amounts of milk have more, smaller meals of milk but make fewer visits to the milk feeder

Milk meals	Ad lib fed	Restrict fed
Total visits to feeder /d	7.4	26
Meal frequency /d	5.3	2
Meal Size (kg)	1.6	2.3

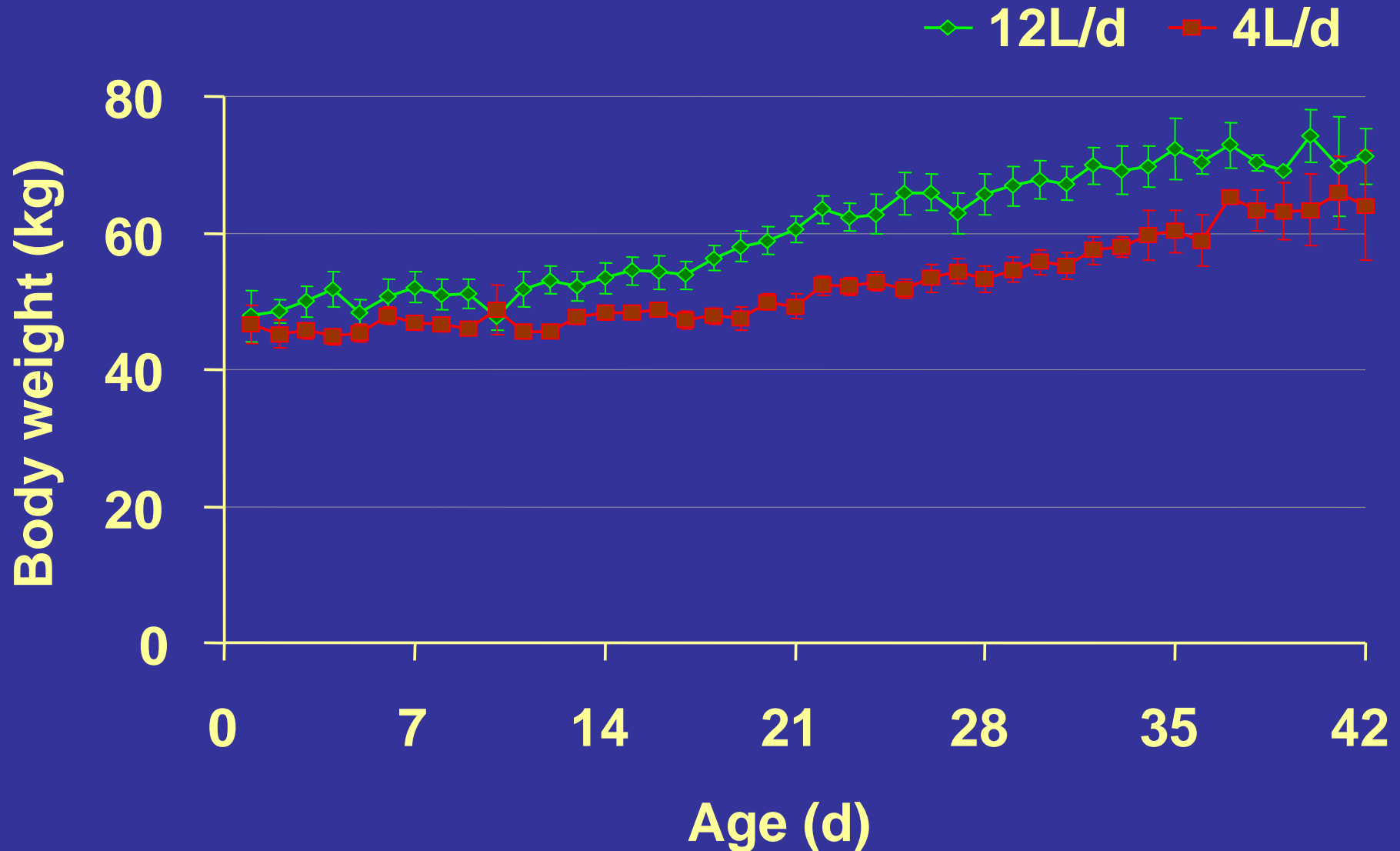
Low milk fed calves visit around time when milk becomes available



A high intake of milk reduces intake of solid starter



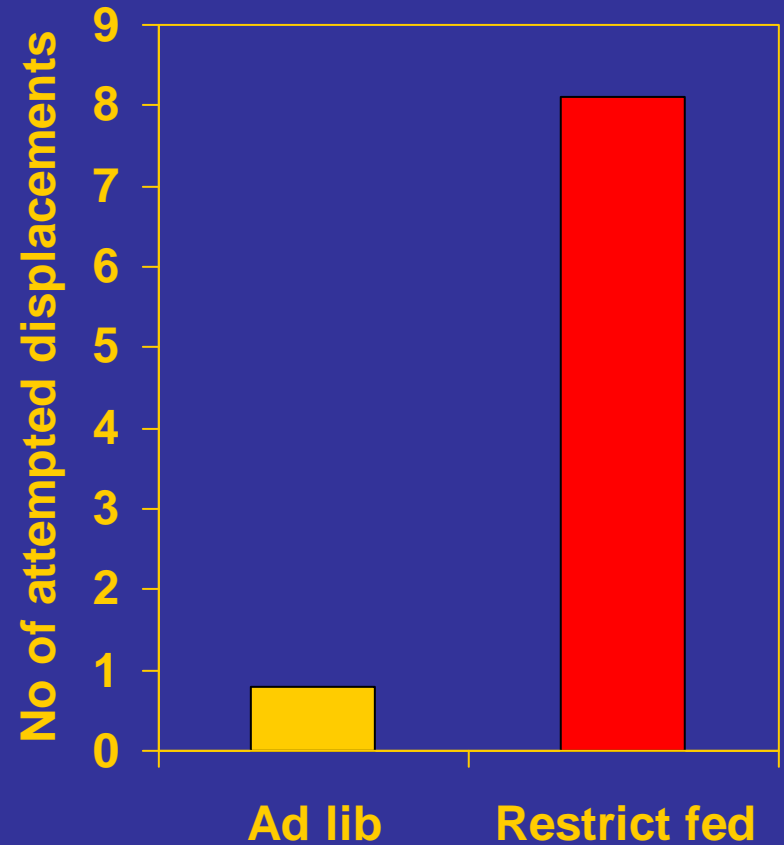
Increased milk intake increased growth rates despite lower starter intake



No Effects on calf health

	High milk fed	Restrict fed
Gastro intestinal problems	13/25	8/25
Respiratory	9/25	8/25
Total morbidity	15/25	15/25

Ad lib feeding reduced attempted displacements at the milk feeder



Feeding dairy calves larger amounts of milk (12L/d or ad libitum):



Increases weight gain during the milk-feeding period

Improves feed conversion efficiency

Reduces behavioural signs of hunger

Does not reduce the health of the animals

May increase milk production during the first lactation

How to wean calves off
large amounts of milk

Group-housed calves show little cross-sucking if fed sufficient quantities of milk and have enough opportunities to suck

.....but what happens when they are weaned?



Can gradual weaning reduce the growth check observed during and after weaning in *high milk fed* calves?

Does gradual weaning reduce cross-sucking?

Optimal weaning strategies for high-milk-fed dairy calves

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¹ MSc In Applied Animal Behaviour and Animal Welfare Program, University of Edinburgh, UK

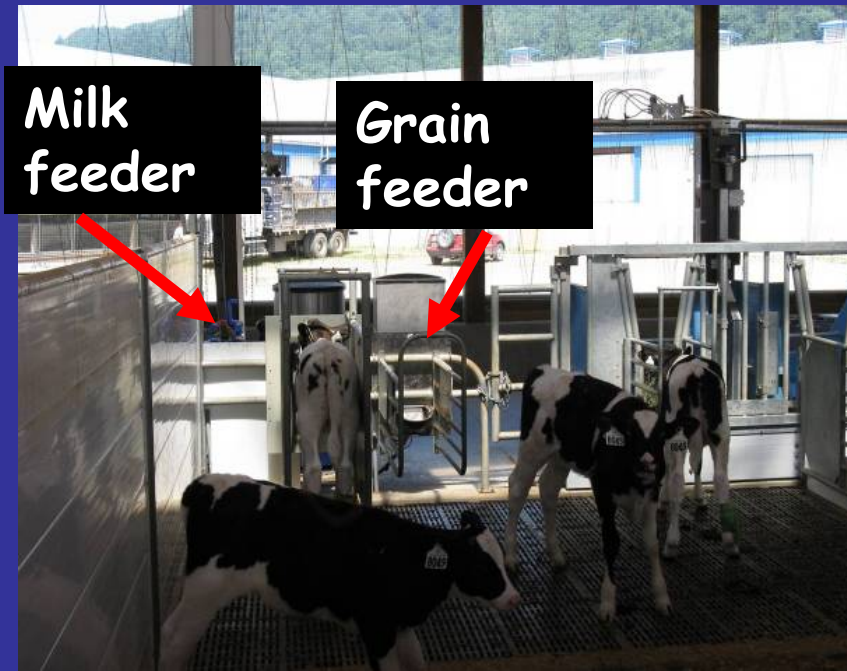
² Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, Agassiz, Canada

³ Animal Welfare Program, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada



Agriculture and
Agri-Food Canada

Methods



Calves fed with automated milk + grain feeders

4 calves/pen

9 repetitions

Calf is recognised by the feeder,
milk and grain intake are recorded
and can be controlled

Treatments

1. Abrupt weaning - 12L/d until 41d
2. Start 19d of age reduce milk allowance by 0.5L/d for 22d weaning
3. Start 31d of age reduce milk allowance by 1.1L/d for 10d weaning
4. Start 37d of age reduce milk allowance by 2.4L/d for 4d weaning

11 Days of x-sucking observations

Day

9 All offered 12L/d of milk

18 ← Start 22d weaning

24

30 ← Start 10d weaning

36 ← Start 4d weaning

39

40

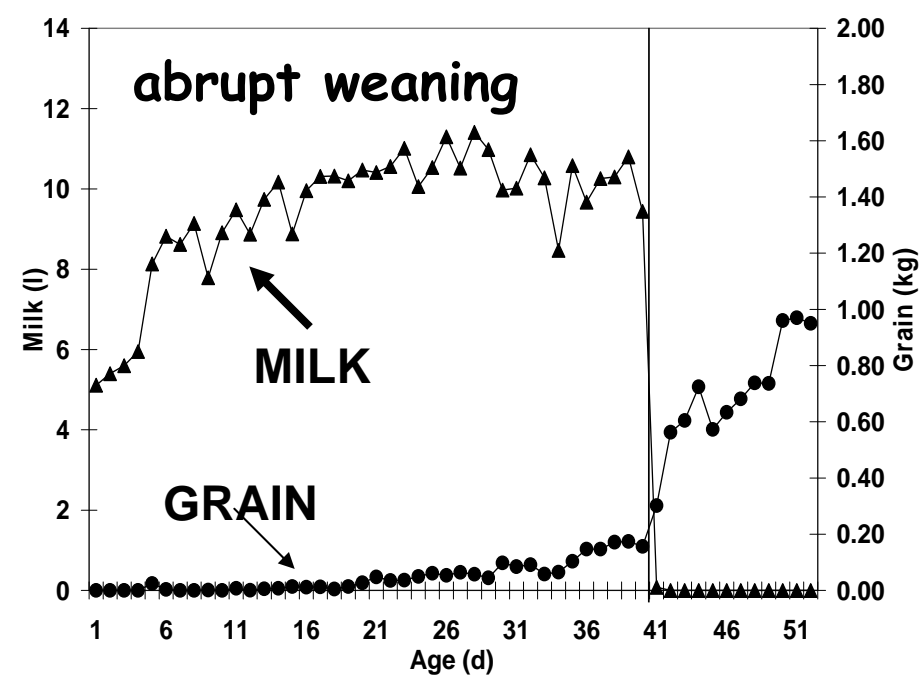
41 ← Abrupt weaned

Weaning completed -
no milk

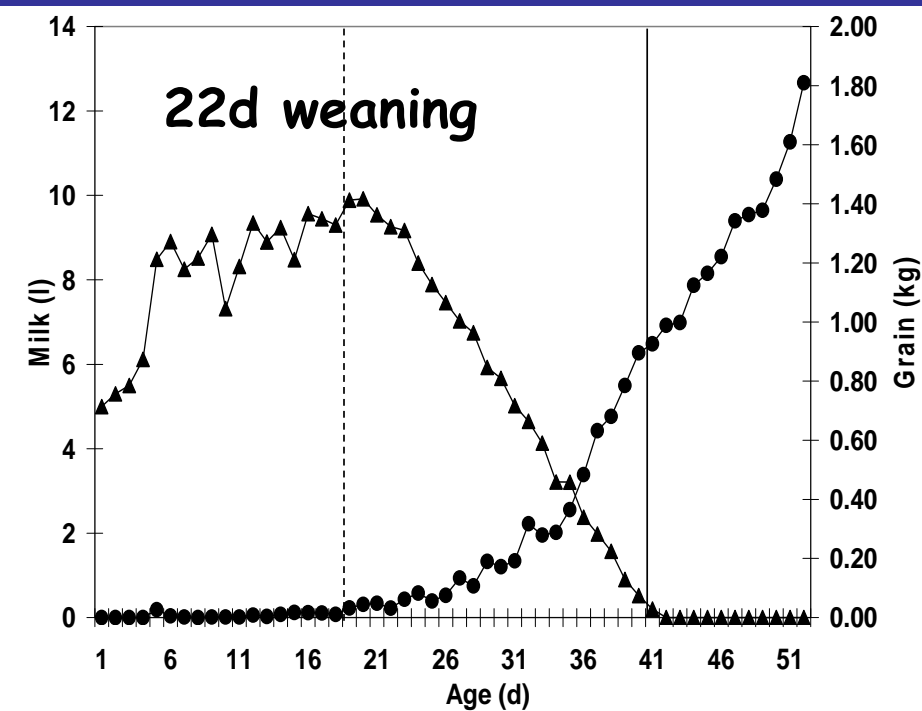
42

46

49



**Gradual weaning
increased grain
intake during and
after weaning**



**Digestible energy (DE)
intake estimated for
milk, grain and total
energy intake**

1. Gradual weaning decreases *energy intake* before weaning but increases energy intake after weaning

2. Abrupt weaning leads to little cross-sucking before weaning but much cross-sucking after

3. Gradual weaning that begins too early (22d) leads to increased cross-sucking before weaning is completed

We measured each calf's level of feeding motivation by the frequency of visits to the milk feeder and the grain feeder and time standing or lying down.

Time spent standing or lying was recorded by activity loggers attached to a leg



A calf's frequency of visits to the milk feeder and to the grain feeder and time spent standing were positively correlated, suggesting that they all reflect feeding motivation

However, the duration of cross-sucking was not positively correlated with any of these

Conclusions:

When fed high quantities of milk from a teat feeder, calves show little cross-sucking

Abrupt weaning results in an increase in cross-sucking

Gradual weaning does not reduce cross-sucking after weaning

Gradual weaning that starts too early (e.g. before 4 weeks of age) increases cross-sucking before weaning

Conclusions:

Individual differences in cross-sucking after weaning may not be related to individual differences in feeding motivation

Or may be an alternative way of responding to hunger (rather than visiting the dry feeders)



Can delaying the age at which calves fed large amounts of milk are weaned off milk:

- increase calves' intake of starter before weaning

- reduce weight loss during and after weaning

- reduce behavioural signs of hunger at weaning?

Calves kept in groups of 9;

fed milk and starter from an automated feeder



Treatments:

a). Fed 6L/d milk, weaned off milk at 48d of age

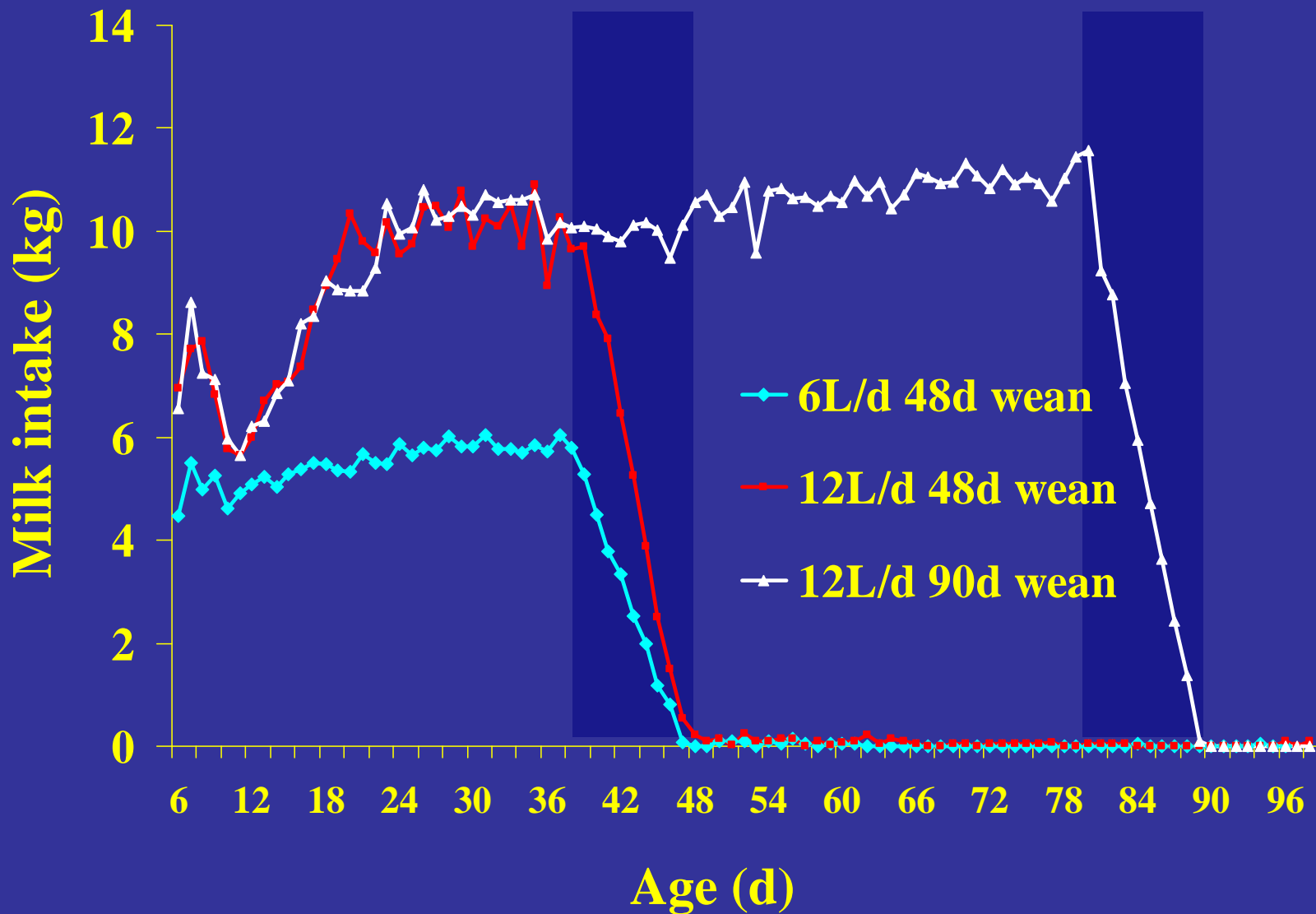
b). Fed 12L/d of milk, weaned off milk at 48d of age

c). Fed 12L/d of milk, weaned off milk at 90d of age

3 calves from each treatment in each group;

Gradual weaning took place over 10d

Milk intake



Conclusions:

High milk intake reduced grain intake but later weaned calves increased grain intake more quickly when weaning began

Calves did not eat enough starter to compensate for lost milk. Energy intake decreased at weaning. This was less for later weaned calves

Weaning at 48d led to a drop in body weight among high milk fed calves. This did not occur when calves were weaned at 90d of age

During weaning calves visited the feeder frequently – a sign of hunger. This increase was less for later weaned calves

Which aspects of feeding behaviour of milk-fed calves are affected by illness.

Does the amount of milk fed influence the effect of illness on feeding behaviour?



Calves kept in groups and fed with automated feeding system.

Fed either high (12L/d or ad lib) or low (4L/d) amounts of milk or milk replacer

Detecting illness through automated monitoring of behavioral changes



Changes in behaviour are one of the first signs that an animal is ill

Daily health checks

General condition

Dehydration

Rectal temperature

Faecal consistency

Navel status



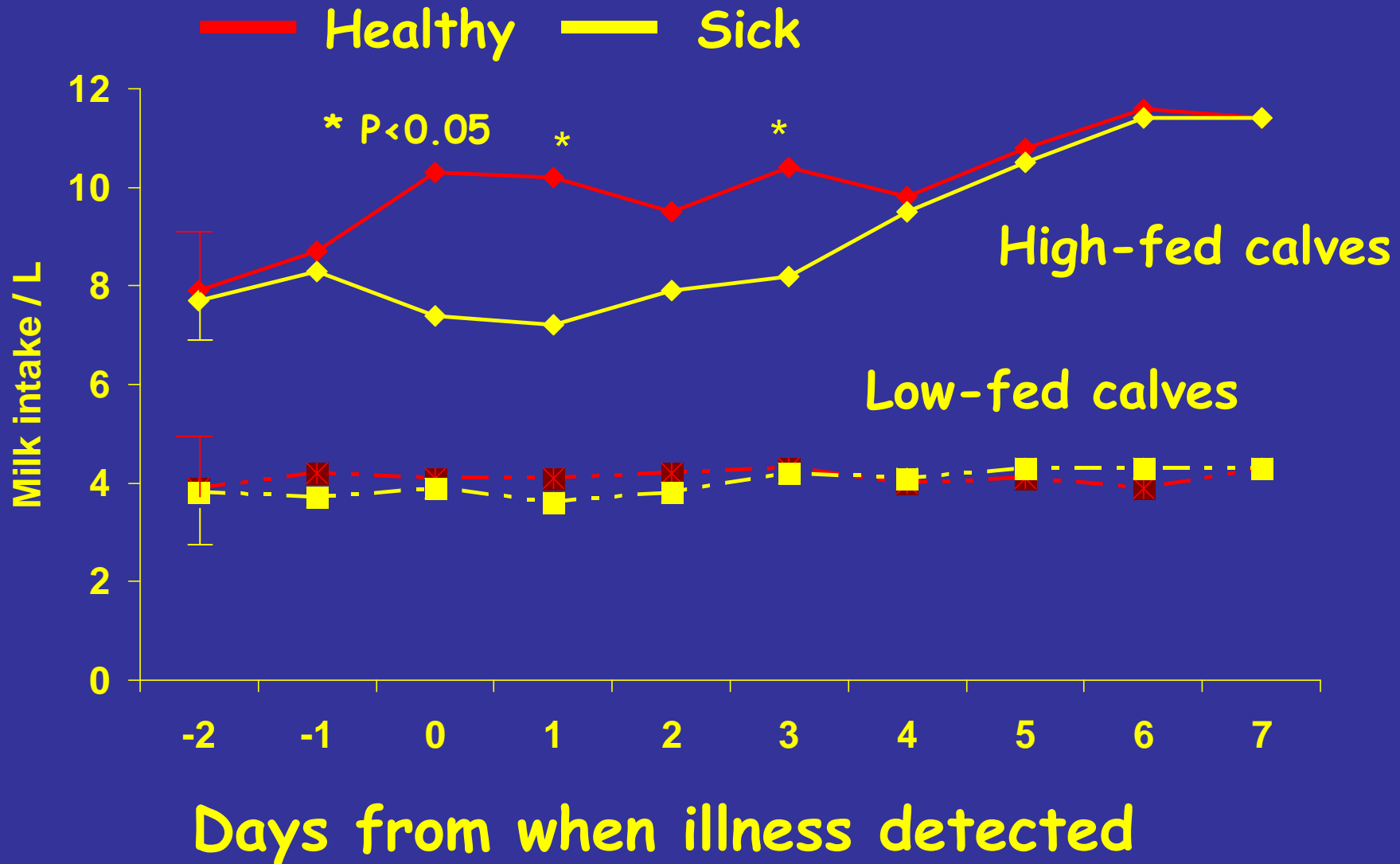
Nasal/ocular discharge

Coughing / Lung sounds

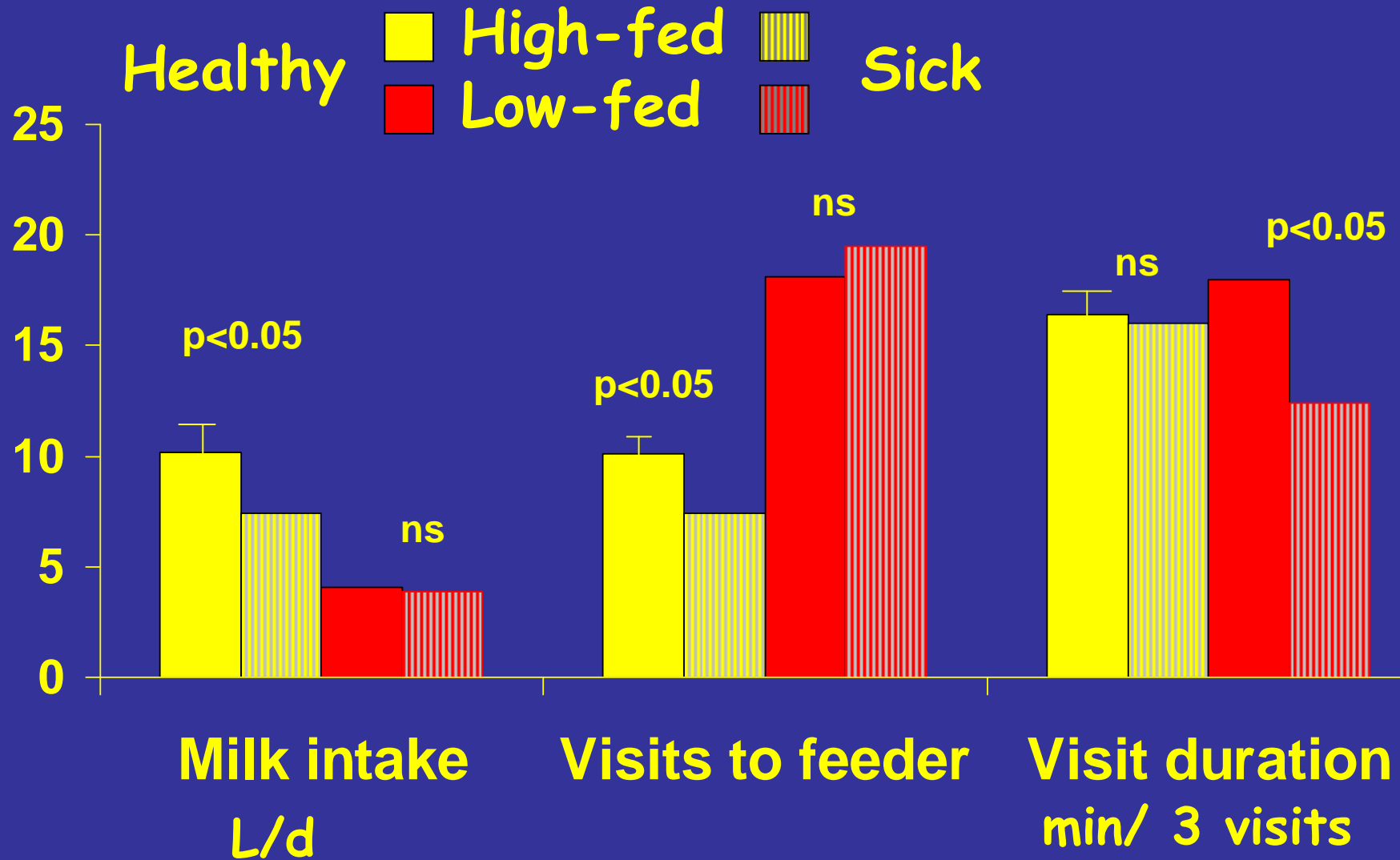
Hair

Muzzle humidity

Illness reduced milk intake only of calves fed high amounts of milk



Effects of illness on feeding behaviour depends on feeding motivation



Improving heifer welfare on farms

- A survey
- An intervention tool



1. Problems areas identified in the survey:

Calving management

Pre weaning mortality

Colostrum management

Pain control during dehorning

Milk feeding and Weaning

Despite frequent recommendations, many dairy producers use management practices that increase the health and welfare risks of milk-fed calves.

In particular, inadequate health monitoring and colostrum management practices need to be improved.

2. On-farm intervention tool to improve rearing practices

Tested on 30 farms in Quebec

New approach of on-farm management and health data collection

A tool to improve calf and heifers rearing practices

Intervention has 2 parts:

**1. Farmers' part:
takes samples and records**

2. A half-day visit:

An interview to document management practices

**a check-list in the barn on housing and other
environment measures**

**→ Observer assigns "marks" and provides
recommendations on the 10 key elements of
rearing practices**

Farmers' part:

Farmers take samples (colostrum and blood) and records (mortality and morbidity) during a 6-months period

Farmers tests for colostrum quality and IG transfer level in blood

Producers measure colostrum quality

We provide colostrometer



Producers measure blood Ig levels

We provide
kits

Producers
take blood
samples



Report and discussion

