

Paste those horns away and it's easier for you both

By LINDA GREENWOOD

Key Points

- Dehorning paste is easy on calves when they are under a week old.
- Clip the horn button free of hair before starting.
- Have a backup plan for any possible misses.

EVERY year, 2,500 calves on the CY Heifer Farm at Elba, N.Y., are dehorned with a method that some dairy producers contend doesn't work! That method is dehorning paste.

"Seven years ago, we were using a butane dehorner at 3 weeks old," recalls Jeanne Wormuth, who manages this 4,000-head heifer-raising facility.

"When an employee accidentally got burned, I started looking at alternative methods — ones that would prevent injuries to the calf handler and be more favorable to the calves.

"Our veterinarian at the time, Dr. Jerry Bertoldo, suggested dehorning paste. With his guidance, we began using it," continues Wormuth.

When and how it's done

Calves arrive at the heifer farm between 3 and 5 days old. Their processing includes getting the hair clipped over their horn buttons. The buds must be completely exposed, she emphasizes, so the paste contacts the skin.

The paste is applied the day the calves arrive — but after they're fed. "After their very busy day, a full stomach puts them in a totally relaxed state," she notes. A gloved employee

quietly moves from sleeping calf to calf, applying the paste.

Dehorning paste is purchased in the syringe applicator (45 grams for \$4.79). To ensure good contact, the bud is lightly brushed first with a small wire brush — to just scruff it up a little, but never breaking the skin. Then a nickel-sized spot of paste is spread on the buds.

That's it. The job is done. At three weeks of age, the buds are rechecked. The few questionable ones are burned.

Done right, Wormuth concludes, "Dehorning paste is an effective, easy and safe method.

"It's so stress-free to the calves that we do it the day they arrive."

The author's tips

Greenwood Dairy, at Canton, N.Y., has been using dehorning paste for five years.

It's a one-person job, doesn't interfere with the vaccinating schedule, and the calves don't mind it. I do over 600 calves a year, with very few needing to be redone.

But it comes with a learning curve, I admit. And if you follow the directions that come with it, you'll be pleased with the results.

■ Apply the paste when the calves are young, and clip the hair around the buds. Scissors won't cut close enough.

After using a men's beard trimmer for many years, I now use a rechargeable clipper made for cats and dogs. Oil the blade often to keep it clean, and protect the head in a nitrile glove when not using it.

■ I do the dehorning in the late morning. During summer, I do it in the hutches. During winter, it's done in the barn when the calves are about 5 days old, and before they go out.

■ Calves are haltered and clipped, and each bud is rubbed with a cloth parlor towel to wipe away any loose hair and dandruff.

■ I give the calves a little nerve block to stop the sting and prevent them from rubbing it off.

■ Paste is applied from a jar with a round-tipped plastic knife. The amount needed is put on the knife, then spread



THE NO-PAIN WAY: One horn bud is properly clipped, and the other is pasted. If the animal were in pain, it would be standing with ears folded back.

over the horn button.

■ Calves remain tied, so they aren't touching each other during and after application.

My method of dehorning draws the most interest with visiting calf-raisers.

One visiting calf-raiser, looking at my weaned calves, all with full heads of hair, exclaimed, "What beautiful heads! Who does your dehorning?"

Greenwood writes from St. Lawrence County, N.Y.