

Dehorn calves with paste

Aurora Villarroel

It's a good practice to dehorn cattle that live in confined areas to prevent injuries to humans and other animals. Of the various dehorning methods, dehorning with paste is easy, effective and economical as well as low-stress to the animal. Here are the main points to consider when using dehorning paste.

- Apply dehorning paste before calves are 2 days old. After two days, calves have figured out how to scratch their heads against something to rub the paste off.
- Using too much paste is the most common mistake beginners make. The result is a big bald spot around the horn area (although the hair will grow back in time). The amount of paste to apply on each horn is about the size of a dime, as indicated in the package insert.
- Don't let the calves get wet for 24 hours after applying the paste. If rain falls on active dehorning paste, it can run off into the eyes and blind the calf. The paste dries in one day, after which it is no longer necessary to keep calves dry.
- Apply paste just before feeding the calves with a bottle. It takes a couple of minutes for the paste to start burning, so if you apply it immediately before feeding, calves are kept busy nursing on the bottle, and they ignore their discomfort. By the time they are done with the bottle, the paste is almost done with the dehorning process, and they will not notice it that much.

Additionally, research performed with human babies shows that giving breast milk, glucose, or sucrose before a single painful procedure significantly reduces heart rate and crying time compared to using distilled water, a pacifier, or swaddling. So, applying the paste immediately before feeding milk with the bottle may help in two ways: the calves are so busy nursing the bottle that they overlook their discomfort, and the sugar in the milk may help reduce the pain. Producers who have switched from hot iron dehorning to using paste to dehorn calves at birth report great success with no complications, and they like that calves are "done" without showing obvious signs of pain. Only minor head shaking was reported.

Dehorn 1-day-old calves.

Apply the dehorning paste right before feeding.

Make sure the paste doesn't get wet for 24 hours.



Be sure to wear gloves when using the paste; it is very caustic. This picture shows everything you need to dehorn with caustic paste: gloves, clippers, a marker and the paste.

Credit: © Oregon State University



1. Locate horn buds.

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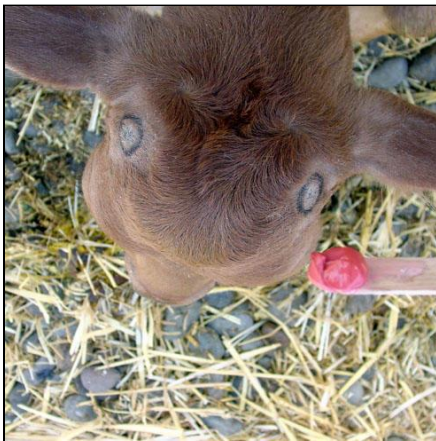
2. Clip hair.

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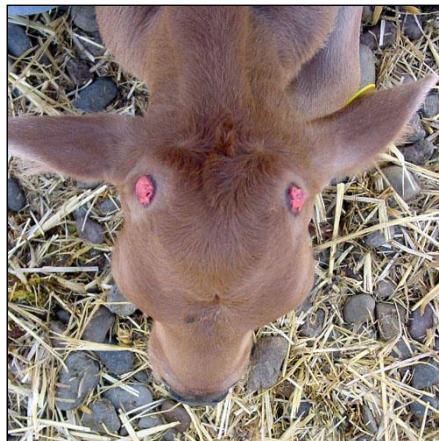
3. Outline sites with a marker.

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4. Apply paste.

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5. Fresh paste.

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6. Paste after 24 hours.

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