Why keeping a BVD positive calf won't vaccinate your herd



A survey by Animal Health and Welfare NI (AHWNI) of 72 farmers who received a BVD positive result has found that 21% did not go on to vaccinate their herd after their first case.

Although on-farm retention of BVD positive calves has fallen in recent years, the myth that keeping one will 'vaccinate' the herd is still heard. A persistently infected (PI) calf exposes other cattle to the virus in an uncontrolled and unpredictable way. Rather than protecting the herd, keeping a PI calf only serves to spread infection, leading to temporary immunosuppression of other calves and increased susceptibility to disease, infection of early-in-calf females, and the birth of further PI calves in the following season.

PI calves shed virus continuously, via their dung, saliva and nasal discharges, making them a reservoir and constant source of infection in the herd. Their prompt removal cuts off the stream of virus entering the farm environment and the risk it presents to other cattle.

Farmers who chose not to vaccinate gave several reasons. The most common were:

- **'It was a one-off' or 'we'd never had BVD before'**. A PI calf sheds virus from birth, so other cattle in the herd will already have been exposed, even if the calf itself was a one-off.
- **'The cows were too far gone in calf'**. Starting vaccination now still protects cattle ahead of the next breeding season. Your vet can advise on the right timing for your herd.
- **'The case originated in another herd'**. Wherever the infection began, a PI calf born on your farm sheds virus on your farm.
- **'Financial pressures'.** Set the cost of vaccination against the cost of further PI calves, poorer fertility, abortions and disease, which can far outweigh it.

While PI calves do not 'vaccinate' a herd, effective vaccines are available. When a BVD positive result is returned for your herd, it is worth reviewing your current vaccination protocol with your vet or, if one is not in place, seriously considering whether a vaccination programme should be started.

Vaccination is an insurance against further BVD cases and against the fertility problems, abortions and immunosuppression the virus causes, which leave calves more vulnerable to pneumonia and scour. The true cost of BVD extends far beyond the initial positive calf, and vaccination works best alongside prompt removal of PI calves and good biosecurity. AHWNI recommends that you discuss with your vet the measures that you could put in place to protect the health of your herd and increase its profitability.

ENDS

Notes for editors:

1. AHWNI is an industry-led organisation responsible for the delivery of the Northern Ireland Bovine Viral Diarrhoea Eradication Scheme. For more information on the operation of the Scheme, please contact AHWNI (email info@animalhealthni.com, tel. 028 7963 9333) or visit the AHWNI website www.animalhealthni.com.
2. About the survey: AHWNI surveyed 390 farmers who received a BVD positive result between April and October 2026, using an online form, with anonymous feedback; 72 responded.