

Methods of dehorning

There are several dehorning methods: with paste, burning, wire and breeding

1 Paste method

In some countries, including the Netherlands, this method is banned because it is not welfare friendly. Two weeks after birth, caustic paste is applied.

It slowly burns away the horn button. Cut the hair from around the horn button before applying paste.

Restrain the calf's head with a halter, because after the treatment the calf might shake its head and cause the paste to burn away other parts around the button. Paste has a reputation as a cruel method that causes large wounds.

2 Burning

The most convenient method of dehorning is cauterization of the horn bud with a hot iron when calves are 4 to 6 weeks old. To avoid pain local anesthesia should be used. The head of the iron is a hollow cup-shaped circle which fits over the horn bud. The hair around the bud is clipped with sharp scissors to make the horn bud visible and to prevent the hair burning. After heating the dehorning iron to the right temperature (the iron can be tested on a plank and must provide an immediate black burn), it is firmly pressed over the horn. By holding the iron at an angle and rotating it slowly, the skin right around the horn bud is cauterized. The objective is to cause the skin under and around the horn bud to die, preventing horn-growth. Care should be taken to ensure that the hot iron is not held against the calf's head too long because brain damage may cause death. Five seconds is usually enough time to achieve effective cautery. Use a proper clean location for horn removal.

3 Wire

In older animals, surgical procedures must be used, especially if horns have grown to a length of 2 cm or more. The removal of larger horns causes a great deal of pain and anesthesia should be used and steps taken to prevent bleeding. Blood attracts flies and causes serious problems in open wounds. Once horns have grown very large, removal of the horns exposes the hollows in the skull and these must be closed to prevent infection. When a horn is removed surgically, the use of a dehorning iron to cauterize the skin around the base of the horn will prevent the possibility of horn tissue growing again and the hot iron also prevents bleeding by cauterizing blood vessels.

4 Breeding

It is possible to breed polled cows, cows without horns. There are now breeding programs e.g. in the Netherlands. The technique involves breeding polled top sires that have excellent traits for production, health and conformation. It will take many years before these bulls are available.

Burning system



Anesthesia is used to avoid pain



Dehorning during maximum 5 seconds



Dehorning with good result



Desinfection of dehorning places



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