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We increased the volume of milk we feed our calves. In the past, we weaned calves over a few days. Is there an ideal weaning strategy now that we are feeding more milk? Calves get up to 2 gallons of milk a day in our new feeding plan.

Currently, there is no consensus on what makes for the best weaning strategy when all pertinent health, welfare, and performance outcomes are taken into consideration. In general, and in the face of high volumes of milk intake, weaning programs should maximize calf starter intake, growth, and play behavior, while minimizing hunger, bawling, illness, and mortality.

In a recent publication in the Journal of Dairy Science (Welk et al., 2024), 44 studies were reviewed and summarized for three main components of a weaning program: weaning age, weaning duration, and weaning method. In general, calves grow either the same or better when they are weaned later (after 8 weeks old when at least 6 liters per day is fed), over longer durations such as 14 days, and when weaning was based on starter intake or some form of a step-down approach. Calf starter consumption is a critical driver for rumen function, leading to readiness for weaning and success of weaning. We can stimulate starter consumption before and during weaning with various management techniques. This includes continuous access to high-quality fresh water, small amounts of chopped grass hay in the starter, free choice chopped alfalfa hay after 4 weeks of age, and pair housing soon after birth or commingling individually housed calves at the start of weaning.

Aside from the specifics regarding weaning age, duration, and method, you will need to account for the capacity of your current facilities, which often is the limiting factor for how late and how long you can push out weaning. I recommend working with your veterinarian and consultant team to find the balance between the ideal weaning strategy and your existing facilities (or potentially new facilities) that will allow your calves to thrive.