MINERALwrites
2025 : QUARTER 4

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The Unsung Duo: Revisiting the Importance of the Dietary Calcium and Phosphorus Relationship

Calcium (Ca) and phosphorus (P) are two of the most abundant minerals in the body and are essential for bone formation, energy metabolism, and numerous cellular functions. While the total amount of these minerals in the diet is important, the source, bioavailability, and ratio of Calcium to phosphorus (Ca:P) are crucial for ensuring proper absorption and utilization of these minerals. This Mineral Writes marks the end of the series that examined the calcium and phosphorus requirements of various livestock species. This issue focuses on ruminants.

Calcium is a key mineral in the animal body, with about 99% stored in bones and teeth, providing structural strength and integrity. The remaining 1% plays a crucial role in maintaining essential physiological functions. This small yet significant portion supports cellular metabolism, facilitates blood clotting, activates enzymes, and ensures proper neuromuscular function. Together, these roles highlight calcium's importance not only for skeletal health but also for overall bodily function.

Phosphorus is the second most abundant mineral in the body, comprising 0.7% to 1.2% of total body weight. About 75% to 80% of this mineral is stored in bones, where it works synergistically with calcium to support the development, formation, and maintenance of skeletal and tooth structures. The remaining 20% to 25% is distributed across all cells, where it fulfills essential metabolic and structural roles. Metabolically, phosphorus is indispensable as a key component of adenosine triphosphate (ATP), the primary molecule responsible for cellular energy transfer. Structurally, it forms the backbone of nucleic acids (DNA and RNA) through phosphodiester bonds and contributes to biological membranes as a constituent of phospholipids.

In ruminants, phosphorus has added significance due to its role in rumen microbial activity and feed digestion. Sufficient phosphorus levels are essential for optimal microbial fermentation, fiber breakdown, and the production of volatile fatty acids, which serve as key energy sources. In addition, phosphorus aids in buffering rumen pH and is necessary for saliva secretion, both of which help maintain rumen health. Deficiency can result in reduced feed intake, poor growth, impaired reproductive performance, and decreased milk yield. Beyond these functions, phosphorus supports fertility, milk secretion, and skeletal strength, while contributing to the elasticity of skin, ligaments, and tendons.

The ideal calcium to phosphorus (Ca:P) ratio for cattle diets is 2:1, which ensures proper mineral absorption and bone health. Incorrect ratios can lead to serious health issues. While a 2:1 ratio is preferred, cattle can tolerate ratios ranging from 1:1 to 7:1. Ratios between 4:1 and 6:1 are often considered a practical upper limit; however, ratios below 1:1 can be harmful.

The relationship between calcium and phosphorus is essential to maintaining skeletal integrity and supporting numerous metabolic functions. These minerals work synergistically to ensure proper bone mineralization and structural stability. In ruminants, vitamin D is a critical regulator of calcium homeostasis by enhancing intestinal calcium absorption, particularly during periods of increased physiological demand, such as lactation or rapid growth. Understanding these relationships is crucial for developing effective nutritional strategies and enhancing overall herd health.

Condition	Description & Key Characteristics of Calcium and Phosphorus Deficiencies	Primary Cause
Osteomalacia	Characterized by unmineralized osteoid; bones soften. Clinical signs include pica and fractures.	Prolonged Phosphorus Deficiency.
Osteoporosis	Bones become weak and brittle due to the loss of bone matrix (calcium).	Deficiency of Calcium.
Pica	A depraved appetite, leading to the eating of non-nutritive objects (e.g., stones, soil). It can be a precursor to osteomalacia.	Most commonly linked to Phosphorus deficiency and/or Sodium deficiency.
Rickets	Failure of bone and cartilage to properly mineralize, leading to bowed legs, swollen joints, and lameness.	Deficiency of Calcium, Phosphorus, or Vitamin D.

The required amount of minerals varies across different production phases. For example, peak-lactation dairy cows need up to 0.80% calcium (Ca) in their diet to compensate for the mineral loss in milk. In contrast, dry beef cows require significantly less, approximately 0.20% calcium. Close-up dry dairy cows are often fed a low-calcium diet, typically less than 0.4% calcium, to activate their hormone system and prevent milk fever immediately after calving.

Beef calves and stocker/grower cattle require balanced diets that include sufficient forage and mineral supplementation to support skeletal development and prevent deficiencies like rickets. Finishing cattle, which are fed grain-heavy diets, often need extra calcium, typically supplied as calcium carbonate, to maintain an appropriate Ca:P ratio of 2:1 to 1.5:1. This helps reduce the risk of urinary calculi, a condition often linked to high phosphorus intake and inadequate calcium supplementation that can arise when feeding grain-based diets. Breeding cows and bulls also benefit from a Ca:P ratio of 2:1 to 1.5:1 for reproductive efficiency and overall health.

Lactating cows have significantly higher calcium requirements to meet the demands of milk production, so it is essential to provide them with adequate calcium sources to maintain metabolic health and productivity.

Beef Cattle			
Production Phase	**Calcium Requirement (% of DM)**	**Phosphorus Requirement (% of DM)**	**Ca:P Ratio (Target)**
Lactating Beef Cow (Peak Milk)	0.27% - 0.31%	0.18% - 0.21%	1.5:1
Stocker/Growing Calf (Forage-based)	0.30% - 0.40%	0.20% - 0.25%	1.6:1
Feedlot/Finishing Steer (High-Grain Diet)	0.40% - 0.50%	0.25% - 0.30%	2.0:1

Dairy Cattle			
Physiological Stage	Calcium Requirement (% of DM)	Phosphorus Requirement (% of DM)	Ca:P Ratio
Calf/6-month Heifer (Active Growth)	0.40%–0.45%	0.25%–0.30%	≈1.5:1 to 1.8:1
18-month Heifer (Slower Growth)	0.35%–0.40%	0.18%–0.22%	≈1.8:1 to 2.2:1
Far-Off Dry Cow (Maintenance)	0.37%–0.44%	0.18%–0.28%	≈1.6:1 to 2.2:1
Lactating Cow (Peak Production)	0.60%–1.0%	0.35%–0.42%	≈1.7:1 to 2.4:1

Calcium and phosphorus absorption in ruminants is influenced by the mineral source, diet composition, and the animal's physiological stage. Calcium is mainly absorbed in the duodenum and jejunum, and its absorption efficiency is affected by vitamin D status, particle size, and solubility. Finely ground calcium carbonate enhances calcium availability in high-concentrate diets. However, excessive phosphorus or oxalates can bind to calcium, thereby reducing its absorption. The overall absorption efficiency ranges from 30–40% in growing cattle to 20–25% in lactating cows.

Phosphorus, which comes from grains and forages, is more bioavailable in ruminants due to the activity of microbial phytase that breaks down phytate in the rumen, achieving absorption rates of 60–70%. Nevertheless, too much calcium can form insoluble complexes with phosphorus, limiting its utilization.

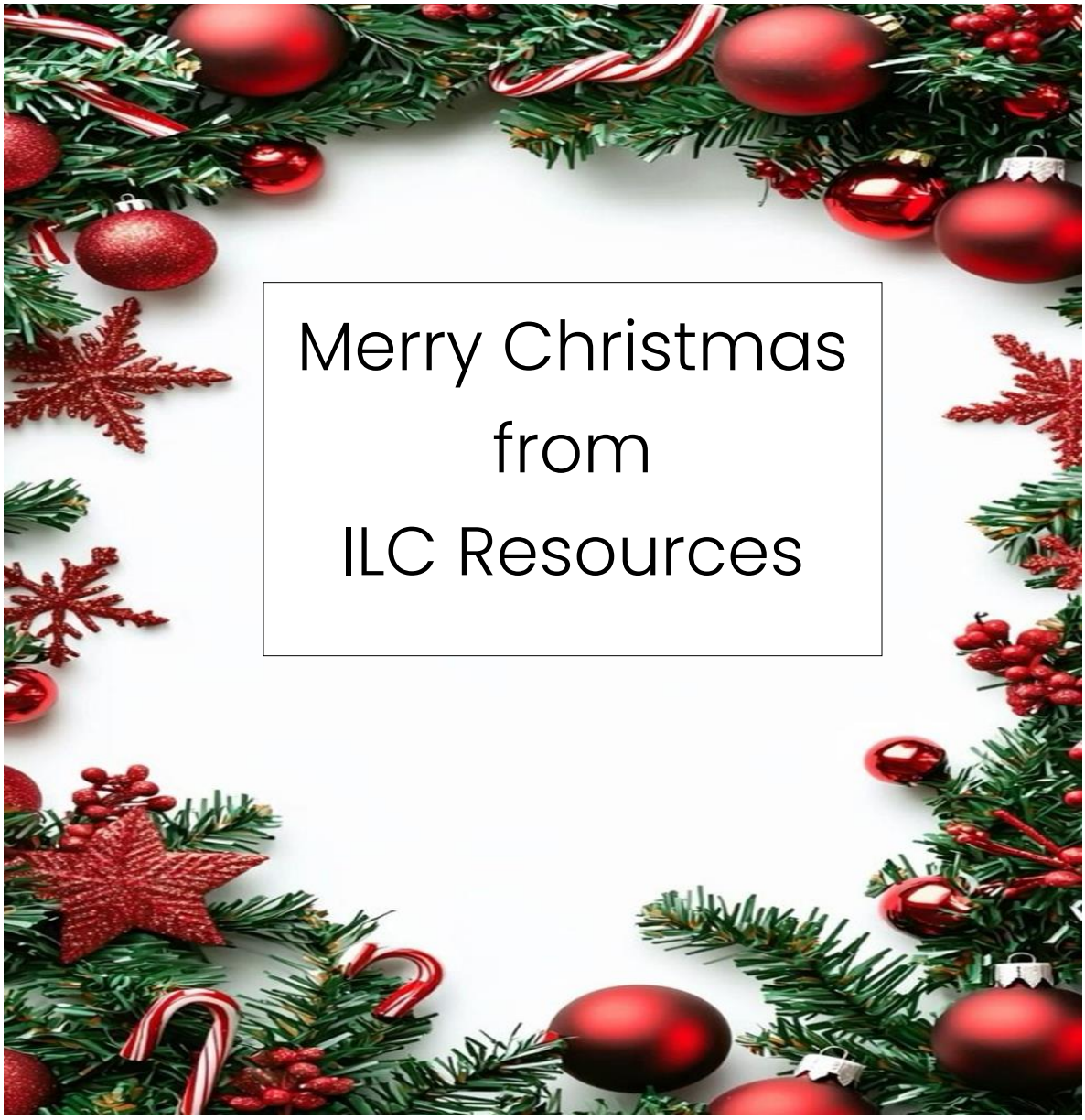
To enhance mineral bioavailability and prevent metabolic disorders, practical feeding strategies are essential. These strategies include maintaining a calcium-to-phosphorus (Ca:P) ratio between 2:1 and 1.5:1, adjusting the dietary cation-anion difference (DCAD) for dry cows, and supplementing calcium after calving. Additionally, high-fat rations may reduce calcium absorption by forming soaps.

Relative bioavailability (RBV) measures how effectively a mineral source is absorbed and used compared to a reference standard.

In ruminants, RBV is influenced by factors such as solubility, particle size, purity, and physiological conditions like rumen pH and vitamin D status. Highly soluble sources, such as monocalcium phosphate and calcium chloride, enable rapid absorption, making them ideal for situations requiring quick calcium correction, such as during fresh cow support. Common sources like calcium carbonate and ground limestone can also have high RBV when finely ground, but they dissolve more slowly, which affects their absorption rate.

Ingredient	Calcium (%)	Phosphorus (%)	Bioavailability Key Consideration	Relative Bioavailability (%)
Calcium Carbonate (Limestone)	36–40	0	Moderate (increases if finely ground)	70–100
Ground Limestone	36–38	0	Moderate to High (better if finely ground)	75–100
Calcium Chloride	36	0	High (rapidly soluble), highly soluble	~95
Dicalcium Phosphate (DCP)	22–28	18–21	High for both Ca & P, well utilized	80–90
Monocalcium Phosphate	16–18	21–24	High for both Ca & P, highly soluble	95–100
Monosodium Phosphate	0	22–25	Very High for P	~ 98

Maintaining the ideal balance of calcium (Ca) to phosphorus (P) is vital for enhancing the health and economic productivity of ruminant production systems, encompassing both dairy and beef operations. These two essential minerals are intricately linked and are critical for ensuring strong skeletal integrity. Moreover, they are crucial to various physiological processes, including ATP synthesis, muscle contraction, and milk production. By optimizing this mineral balance, producers can significantly improve the overall performance and well-being of their livestock.



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