

FEEDING THE FRESH CALVED COW

One of the toughest challenges that dairy farmers face is getting fresh cows off to a fast start. Calving causes hormonal change and a significant amount of stress, which usually results in sluggish appetites. In less than a two-month period, a dairy cow goes from producing no milk to peak production. Bringing the cow up to full concentrate intake to cope with this is a real challenge. Dramatic changes are taking place in the rumen, thus a gradual ration transition is extremely important.



Body Condition

Body condition at calving has a tremendous impact on a cow's appetite. Fat cows usually have sluggish appetites. Close To Calving cows should not be losing condition during the last 2-3 weeks when the feed intake depression occurs. Negative energy balance (weight loss) prior to calving increases the likelihood of ketosis after calving and inhibits fertility. Strive to have cows calve with a body condition score of 2.5-3.5.

How condition loss affects fertility. Source: Ferguson 1989

Condition loss (body scores)	Conception to First Service
0 - 0.5	65%
0.5 - 1.0	53%
Greater than 1.0	17%

Fresh Cow Appetite

Sluggish appetites after calving are a common problem in most dairy herds, even with cows that are not over conditioned. Every additional kilo of dry matter intake translates to about 2 litres of milk. Many metabolic problems, including displaced abomasums, milk fever and ketosis are indirectly related to depressed dry matter intake. Fresh cows with good appetites seldom have metabolic problems.

Long fibre

Ensure adequate long fibre with forages. Very short chop grass silage and finely chopped maize silage are not ideal. Whole crop and straw chopped to 5cm are good sources of effective fibre. Lots of long bale silage, long hay and long straw will reduce intakes.

Digestible fibre

Soya hulls and beet pulp provide a source of highly digestible fibre. They should not replace long fibre but are excellent for fresh cows because they contain a source of fibre that is high in energy.

How much compound after calving?

Because of the energy gap (milk production higher than intakes can cope with) in early lactation, there is a need to achieve maximum intakes quickly. Herein lies a danger of over feeding concentrates and sickening cows. Other problems could be rumen acidosis, low butterfat and depressed milk yields all leading to unhealthy cows.

The rule here is to start at the level fed in the Close To period. If you were feeding 2kgs, start at 2kgs. If feeding 4kgs at pre calving, then start at 4kgs for the Fresh Cow. Problems occur when feeding only 1kg pre calving and starting at higher levels when calved.

How quickly to maximum compound levels?

During the first 3 days postpartum, do not increase compound. Dry matter intake is too low. After 3 days, increase compound feeding gradually. A good guideline is 0.5kg increase per day. So, if a cow starts at 3kgs and is given 3 days at this level, she would be on a maximum 8kgs at 13 days post calving.

If fed only 1kg pre calving, then it would be 17 days before she has 8kgs/day.

More key points.

- Fresh cows need the highest quality forage on the farm
- Feed frequently. Keep fresh feed in front of cows. Keep feed troughs clean.
- Avoid unpalatable ingredients
- An abundant supply of fresh clean water is essential
- Fats fed to fresh cows must be of a high quality. Low quality fats can cause palatability problems and disruptions in rumen digestion
- Protein helps to stimulate dry matter intake. Undegradable protein (UDP) is important, but high levels drive up milk production with intakes lagging behind.
- When at all possible, avoid undue stress or stress related conditions (i.e. crowded pens, crowded feed fence, or excessive handling). The fresh cow is already under a lot of stress. She doesn't need any more.

Feed additives

The feed additives that have demonstrated improved dry matter intake are yeasts and rumen buffers. Yeasts are highly recommended to have a positive impact.

In which milking group should I put cows after they calve?

They should really go in the high group. If pre calving intakes are good, then there should be no problem. If they are placed in a lower group or a fresh cow group, they will have to be moved at some time. This is stressful and has a major negative effect on the cow, particularly on fertility. If it is necessary to put them in a separate group, move them to the high group after 2 weeks at the latest.

Summary

To ensure fresh cows get off to a fast start, we must begin with a good dry cow programme. Feeding the Close To and fresh cows should be managed to encourage maximum dry matter intakes. A good appetite will go a long way toward preventing post calving metabolic problems. Healthy cows are happy cows.