

MIRACLE OF BIRTH CENTER

Dairy FAQ

DAIRY TOPICS

Why is the calf separated from its mother?

After the calf is born, the mother licks it clean or it is dried with a towel. The calf's navel is dipped in disinfectant to prevent navel infection. The first milk or colostrum is milked from the cow and fed to the calf. It is important for the calf to get an adequate amount of colostrum in the first 24 hours of life when it can be absorbed by the intestinal track. The colostrum is rich in antibodies that protect the calf from infections early in life and it contains valuable nutrients to get the calf off to a good start.

Unlike beef calves that can nurse from the mother whenever they want, dairy calves are separated from the mothers and are fed milk or milk replacer two or three times per day. This causes the calf to develop a strong bond with humans because the calf learns to associate the humans with bringing her food and taking care of her. This is very important for a dairy cow because she must be very comfortable around humans when she becomes a milking cow. A calf raised in its own hutch or pen also has less chance of getting intestinal or respiratory infections.

A calf needs about 8-10% of its body weight in milk or milk replacer each day. That is only eight or ten pounds of milk for a hundred-pound calf. These dairy cows can produce up to 125 lbs. of milk or more each day, which is far more than the calf needs. This is the milk that the dairy farmer sends to the creamery to be used for fluid milk, cheese, yogurt, and ice cream.

How much milk can a cow produce in a year?

A good herd of cows nowadays can produce about 25,000 lbs. of milk per cow per year. This is about 3,000 gallons! Early in lactation a cow can produce 10 to 15 gallons of milk per day. The record production from an individual cow in one year is around 50,000 lbs.!

How often does a cow have a calf?

Ideally, a dairy farmer would like to have a calf from each cow about once per year. Gestation length in a cow is 283 days, just over 9 months. After a cow freshens (delivers a calf), her average lactation length is about 10-11 months. She is then dried off for about two months when she hopefully will be ready to freshen again. This means that the cow will be bred the first time about two months after she freshens.

What do you feed a cow?

A cow's diet consists of forage and grain. Good quality alfalfa and corn silage are the most common forages, but other grasses and silages are used as well. Grain is composed primarily of corn as an energy source and soybean meal as a protein source. Many other ingredients are used to fine-tune the ration and are introduced based on price and availability. Cows are able to convert low quality plant "left-overs" from other industries (potatoes, oranges, almond hulls, wet brewers grain, distillers grain) into high quality protein foods (meat and milk). Without cows these by-products would just go to waste. It is common to combine the forages and grain into a "Total Mixed Ration" to prevent digestive upsets and to encourage the cow to eat as much as possible. The more she eats, the more milk she can produce.

A calf is fed milk or milk replacer for the first six to eight weeks. During this time, it is presented with a high-quality creep feed which she learns to eat and becomes able to digest by the time she is weaned. After that the calves are fed a combination of forage and grain to promote steady growth without becoming too fat.

What age is the cow when she first calves?

A heifer is bred at about 15 months of age if she has grown to the proper size at that time. This means that she will freshen for the first time at about two years of age.

How old can a cow live?

Some cows can stay in a herd for ten to 12 years or more, but it is more common for a cow to have around four lactations before she is replaced by a young heifer.

What happens to a cow after she can no longer be in the milking herd?

Cows that are no longer used as milking cows are sold for meat.

What's all this about BST in milk?

Most creameries no longer accept milk from cows that have been treated with BST even though it is safe to consume.

BST (Bovine Somatotropin) is an injectable hormone given to cows to improve milk production. It is a naturally occurring product normally found in all cows and all milk. The FDA has found commercially made BST to be safe and wholesome for cattle and consumer. It is impossible to detect any difference in milk from cows given BST compared to cows that have not been given the product. It has been up to the producers and their creameries to decide whether they will incorporate BST into their herds.