

Animal Care on Dairy Farms Fact Sheet

A cow's health is of the utmost importance to dairy farmers, because proper animal care leads to the production of high quality milk. Nutritious diets, healthy living conditions and good medical care are all essential for a healthy herd, and these are among the many animal welfare practices routinely used by dairy farmers.

The dairy industry has in place a number of initiatives that demonstrate our commitment to animal well-being. In 2009, we launched the National Dairy FARM (Farmers Assuring Responsible Management) program: www.nationaldairyfarm.com, a nationwide, verifiable animal well-being program that demonstrates U.S. milk producers are committed to the highest quality standards.

Animal scientists and dairy farmers continually explore different ways to improve the comfort of dairy cows. Typical practices on modern farms include:

Food & Shelter

- Dairy cows have access to feed as well as fresh, clean water 24 hours a day. Many dairy farms use “free-stall housing,” which is a type of barn that allows cows to eat, drink and sleep whenever and wherever they choose.
- Today's dairy farms use ventilation and water-distribution systems to maintain temperature controls in hot or cold weather.
- Farmers employ professional nutritionists to develop a scientifically formulated, balanced and nutritious diet for their cows. Diets include hay, grains, protein sources and vitamins and minerals.

Health & Medical Attention

- Cows receive regular veterinary care, including periodic check-ups, preventative vaccinations and prompt treatment of illness.
- A cow that is being treated with antibiotics is separated from the milking herd and placed in a separate area so her milk does not enter the food supply. She is not put back into the herd until the antibiotics have cleared her system.
- All milk is strictly tested for antibiotics on the farm and processing plant. Any milk that tests positive is disposed of immediately and does not get into the food supply. In such cases, the farmer responsible for the milk is required to pay for the full tanker of milk.

Tail Docking

- Some dairy farmers crop the tails of their animals to promote cleanliness, similar to what people do to some breeds of dogs.
- Switch trimming, which is the removal of the hair at the end of the tail, is the preferred alternative to docking for hygiene purposes.
- Because the procedure has limited impact on the animal's comfort, and no negative impact on the safety or quality of milk, we regard this as one of the many individual management decisions dairy farmers make in their operations.

Dehorning/Disbudding

- Dehorning is a practice used for decades to help reduce the risk of injury to cows and animal handlers.
- When possible, dehorning is performed at an early age. This “disbudding” of non-developed horn buds is a fairly simple procedure that doesn’t require anesthesia.
- For a cow with developed horns, dairy farmers and veterinarians using best industry practices will ensure the comfort and safety of an animal through sedation or anesthesia.

Calves

- Most farms separate the calf from the cow within 24 hours of birth, which eases the stress on both animals. It also helps prevent disease in the vulnerable newborn calf by moving it to a nearly sterile environment such as a calf hutch.
- Dairy farm employees or veterinarians keep a close eye on both the cow and calf during calving to ensure the health and safety of both animals.

Animal Handling & Transportation

- On a daily basis, cows move on their own from their pens and fields as well as to and from the milking parlor.
- While most dairy cows spend their lives on a single farm, they may be transported when they are bought and sold. They are handled carefully in a manner that minimizes stress.

Milk Quality

- Dairy farmers adhere to strict food safety regulations, maintaining clean, safe facilities.
- Milking equipment is thoroughly cleansed before and after each use to preserve a sanitary environment.
- Milking machines deliver milk directly from the cow to a refrigerated holding tank, where the milk is rapidly cooled to between 38° to 45° Fahrenheit to preserve freshness and safety. The milk is then quickly transported to processing plants for continued freshness and safety.
- Some dairy farmers choose to use rbST to boost their herd’s milk production, which contributes to a plentiful milk supply. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), as well as other leading health organizations, have concluded that there is no significant difference between the milk from cows that are treated with rbST and milk from cows that are not treated with rbST. For details, visit www.fda.gov/AnimalVeterinary/SafetyHealth/ProductSafetyInformation/ucm130321.htm.
- Dairy is one of the most regulated and inspected industries in agriculture.

Somatic Cells

- All milk naturally contains some somatic cells, as they are simply white blood cells.
- Somatic cell counts are used as a general gauge of the cow’s well-being and stress level; higher counts do not necessarily mean there is an illness.
- Farmers and milk processors routinely test their milk for somatic cell counts in accordance with strict standards set by the state and federal Pasteurized Milk Ordinance regulations. Milk that fails to pass these standards does not go into the food supply.
- Somatic cell counts have fallen significantly in the U.S. over the past 15 years as farming practices have advanced.

For more information or technical references, contact National Milk Producers Federation (www.nmpf.org) or Dairy Management, Inc. (www.dairyfarmingtoday.org).