

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.

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 always have access to feed and fresh, clean water. Additionally, many of today's modern dairy farms use "free stall housing," which is a type of barn that allows cows to eat and sleep whenever and wherever they choose.
- Farmers ensure that their cows have room to lie down, stretch, eat and drink comfortably.
- Many dairy farmers have installed rubber or other non-slip flooring in their barns to make it easier for the cows to move around. Cows may sleep on waterbeds, sand beds or mattresses made of rubber, foam or a combination of the two.
- Most dairy barns use advanced ventilation systems to assure healthy air quality. On warm days, farmers use fans and misters to make cows feel cool and comfortable.
- Farmers employ professional nutritionists to develop a scientifically formulated, balanced and nutritious diet for their cows. Diets include hay, grains, protein sources (such as soy) and other vitamins and minerals.

Health & Medical Attention

- Dairy cows interact every day with farm employees during their regularly scheduled milkings.
- Cows receive regular veterinary care, including periodic check-ups, preventative vaccinations and prompt treatment of illness.
- It's important to note that dairy cows are not routinely treated with antibiotics. When antibiotics are used to treat a clinically diagnosed illness, the cow is taken from the milking herd and treated. She is not put back into the milking herd until her milk tests free of antibiotics.
- Every tanker load of milk is strictly tested for antibiotics. In the extremely rare event that any milk tests positive, it is disposed of immediately, never reaching the public. Farmers are financially liable if antibiotics are found in the milk, so they take these regulations very seriously.

Calves

- Dairy farmers provide a clean, dry, well-lit, and well-ventilated separate calving area to ensure comfortable, safe and hygienic conditions for both mother and calf.
- Both the cow and calf are monitored closely during the birthing process and afterward. Some farmers have video cameras in the calving area so that they can closely monitor their cows during and after the birthing process.
- After each birth, the farmer has the cow go through an appropriate resting period to ensure her health and comfort.

Animal Handling

- 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 work hard to protect the quality and safety of the milk supply. For example, milking equipment is sanitized daily.
- Milk is transferred directly from the cow to a refrigerated tank, which is transported daily for processing. Most milk only travels about 100 miles to get from the dairy to your local grocery store.
- Some farmers use a hormone supplement, known as rbST or BGH, to increase the milk production of selected cows. Extensive studies and review over more than 20 years has concluded that the use of rbST does not affect the quality of the milk. For details, visit www.cfsan.fda.gov/~ear/CORBST.html.
- Milk and dairy products are among the most tested and regulated foods in this country.

Dairy Farm Expansion

- Many dairy farmers, like other business owners, are modernizing and improving their efficiency in order to continue to support their families and meet consumer demand for dairy products.
- Of the 65,000 dairy farms in America today, most are smaller farms with less than 200 cows. The vast majority of U.S. farms – big and small – are family owned and operated.
- All dairy farmers, regardless of the farm's size, depend on healthy cows for their livelihood.

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