

Management of Fresh Dairy Cows

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The transition period from the end of gestation into the milking herd is a critical point of management on a dairy. This period consists of the three weeks before calving and the three weeks after calving. If managed correctly, fresh dairy cows can have few problems throughout their lactation, produce more milk, and improve profitability for the dairy operation. However, poorly managed dry cows will calve in with problems, will be fighting throughout the lactation to catch up, and this will be reflected in their future production and reproductive performance. Here are a few important reminders for fresh cow success.

- **Nutrition management in dry cows** is of utmost importance. Management of fresh dairy cows starts during the dry period not just at calving time. Close-up dry cows (cows within 3 weeks of expected calving date) should begin receiving some of the forages they will be fed after calving. These rations should be balanced to provide adequate, but not excessive, amounts of energy, protein, minerals and vitamins. This enables them to hit the ground running as fresh cows and transition quickly to the milking ration. Close-up dry cows also need more space to accommodate their larger size. Feed bunk space for this group should be at 3 feet per cow (headlocks at 30 inch/cow), and there should be at least one freestall for every cow. When deciding how much space is needed for housing this group, plan for the maximum number of close-up dry cows at any given time, not the average.
- **Body condition score (BCS)** should be monitored particularly closely during this time. Close-up dry cows should have a BCS between 3.0 to 3.25 but not greater than a 3.5. While cows that are too thin will be challenged to keep up once fresh, the greater danger is with cows of higher BCS. Excess fat stores are a setup for fatty liver, leading into ketosis.
- **Somatic cell counts of fresh cows:** Obviously fresh cows are to be excluded from the tank for the first several milkings regardless, but this is an important time to watch for mastitis. Somatic cell counts at this time are an indication of how well the dry cow program is managed. As cows are dried off, individuals should be treated with a dry cow antibiotic and a teat sealant used. To further minimize exposure to mastitis-causing pathogens, dry cow areas should be clean and mud areas minimized. Optimizing immune system function can also help the cow fight any infections on her own. This can be achieved by ensuring a proper balance of minerals. Copper, zinc, selenium, and Vitamin E are particularly helpful for immune function. Proper use of vaccines for environmental mastitis can help decrease the severity and duration of infections after calving.
- **Keep a close eye on the behavior** of fresh cows. Watch for cud-chewing and alertness in particular. This is an important time for watching for uterine infections; cows showing symptoms, such as dull eyes, elevated temperatures, and droopy heads, should especially be checked by a veterinarian.

Provide adequate feed bunk and resting space: The fresh cow group also needs more feed bunk and freestall space than the group in the middle of their lactations. Fresh cows should have 30" of bunk space, and one freestall per cow. Access to feed at all times is critical and fresh cows should be close to the feed at least 20 hrs daily.

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