

Lactation Performance of Dairy Cows

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COMMENTARY

Cows must calve to produce milk and the lactation cycle is the period between one calving and the next. The cycle is split into four phases, the early, mid and late lactation. In an ideal world, cows calve every 12 months. The lactation period runs from two weeks after calving until drying off. Cows are at risk of new infections from contagious or environmental bacteria at every milking during this time. Also, lactation performance in dairy cattle depends upon genetic and environmental factors. Genetic background, climate, diseases, feeding, year and season of calving have been reported to affect milk production, lactation length and dry period

Farmers can grow different types of grass like Napier grass, brachiaria, lucerne and desmodium which are mixed to make cows produce more milk. The dairy meal also forms part of the cow's feed. It is made of ingredients that give the right balance of energy, protein and minerals. Supplementing high-producing dairy cows with chromium during the transition period can increase feed intake and milk production during early lactation. Supplementing high-producing dairy cows with chromium during the transition period can increase feed intake and milk production during early lactation. Chromium supplementation can also improve reproductive performance, cell-mediated and humoral-immune responses. The dry period of a dairy cow should be considered an important phase of her lactation cycle.

Drying off: When drying off a cow, the goal is to abruptly end milk secretion and to seal the teat canal as quickly as possible. Shifting rumen fermentation so that more propionic acid is produced is apt to increase milk protein and decrease fat content. However,

excessive energy intake, such as overfeeding concentrate, may reduce milk fat content and increase milk protein.

Dairy cows are milked each day. Depending on the farm, they are milked twice or three times a day. On our farm, our cows are milked twice a day. This is for breeding purposes but is beneficial for the amount of time the cows need to wait in the holding area.

Several factors influence the quantity of milk produced during lactation. These include the amount of secretory tissue; lactation length; seasonal factors such as photoperiod, heat, and cold stress; seasonal changes in feed availability and quality of feed; persistency of lactation; and background genetics of the cow. The udder should be emptied at each milking and this will stimulate the udder to develop more milk. Always milk the animal quietly. A good time to milk is in the morning before the animal goes out to graze and in the evening. Always milk at the same time each day. A major goal of proper feeding is to maximize feed intake during early lactation. The sooner a cow reaches high levels of feed intake, the sooner she moves out of negative energy balance. Consequently, reproductive performance improves and milk production is greater. Antibiotic dry cow treatment is administered into the udder immediately after the last milking of a lactation. It is designed to remain in the udder in concentrations high enough to kill mastitis bacteria for a period which depends on the product used, which is usually between 20 and 70 days. Too long a dry period may lead to overfat cows, while too short will not allow cows enough recovery time. The optimum is around 60 days, but extending it for thinner cows can be a very good way of recovering body condition before calving, especially where group feeding isn't an option.

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