

Attention to Early Lactation Cows and Dry Cows Two Weeks Before Calving Pays Dividends

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The care and health of an early lactation cow have a direct impact on her milk production and ultimately the profit a cow will make for a dairy farmer. During early lactation, getting cows on feed as fast as possible after calving is one important step in getting cows to peak and milk well in early lactation. For every additional pound of milk a cow gives at her peak milk production, this increased pound of milk translates into an additional 225 lbs of milk over her lactation. For example, if we can get a cow to peak 5 lbs higher in early lactation, this increased production could amount to an additional \$100 profit for a dairy farmer.

Milk production during early lactation relates to how cows were managed **one month before calving through two months after calving**. The dry period for a dairy cow does set the stage for the next lactation. Cows three weeks before calving need to be managed and fed so that they are ready to consume the type of forages and more grain when they enter the milking herd, are healthy, and are ready to consume as much feed as soon as possible after calving. To achieve this objective, dry cows within three weeks of calving should be fed and managed separately from the other dry cows. They need to be adjusted to the forages and other feeds they will be receiving once they calve. If the dry cows are not fed silage, they need to be introduced to silage two to three weeks before calving. Their grain needs to be balanced so that they receive the needed amounts of energy and protein, but these close-up dry cows need to consume enough forage to maintain a properly functioning rumen and cud chewing. Thus, Holsteins close to calving should not be fed more than 8 to 10 lbs of grain. During this time frame, it is very important that close-up dry cows do not go off-feed. If they go off-feed, this can result in an increased incidence of many health problems and decrease milk production after calving.

Getting cows off to a good start after calving is very important. Manage fresh cows so that they eat as much high quality feed as possible after calving. At the same time, stress should be held to a minimum. Cow comfort also is very important. Comfortable freestalls and proper ventilation in the summer are critical in getting fresh cows to eat as much feed as possible. Fresh cows should be fed high quality forages. Moldy or poor quality forages will decrease forage intake and can cause health problems and lower feed intakes. If grain is fed separately from the forages, grain needs to be increased steadily but not too rapidly. The amount of grain fed should be increased slowly over a week to 10-day time period and not immediately after calving. Feed bunks should never be empty or contain just corn cobs. Provide enough bunk space (2 to 2.5 feet per cow) so that the more timid, fresh cows can compete with the later lactation cows for feed.

Feeding and management programs one month before cows or heifers calve and two months after calving are critical in getting cows to milk well and rebred.