

## Old Wives' Tales Are Not Always True

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**Old Wives' Tale #1: Restricting feed for bred heifers and dry cows will result in the heifer or cow having a smaller calf and thus less calving problems.**

**Fact:** An underfed heifer or cow will use her own energy and protein reserves to support the growth of the calf inside of her. The calf will still grow to the same size as if she was fed properly. Basically, the growth of the calf has a higher nutrient priority than growth of the bred heifer. Underfed heifers may have more trouble calving because they are smaller. Older cows will use their body stores of fat and protein and these stores will not be available to support milk production after calving. These cows will not milk as well the next lactation.

**Bottom line:** Underfeeding dry cows and springing heifers does not result in a smaller calf. The cow or heifer suffers and she may have more calving problems and/or may not milk as well this next lactation.

**Old Wives' Tale #2: Calves fed milk or milk replacer do not need free-choice water.**

**Fact:** Feeding calves free-choice water increases starter intake and weight gain. In a research study, depriving calves of drinking water decreased starter intake by 31% and decreased weight gain by 38% over those calves provided water free-choice. Free-choice water enters the rumen and along with high-quality calf starter helps convert a calf from a simple-stomached animal to one with a functional rumen which can utilize forages and grains. When calves are fed milk or milk replacer, the milk is funneled through the esophageal groove to the true stomach and not into the rumen. Thus, milk or water added to milk will not provide water for the bacteria to grow in the calf's rumen. Clean, fresh water must be provided separately, free-choice.

**Bottom line:** Water must be provided free-choice throughout the year not just in the summertime.

**Old Wives' Tale #3: I like to breed my heifers at an older age so that they are full grown when they enter the milking herd.**

**Fact:** Holstein heifers should be bred when they are 750-800 lbs and they should weigh 1350 lbs just before calving. Sometimes farmers underestimate the weight of heifers or they may have difficulty perceiving how much heifers will grow after they have been bred. Properly-fed heifers continue to grow after they are bred. Also, two-year old heifers can grow the first two years after they calve. After they calve, the key is to feed first-calf heifers enough of a well-balanced diet which contains high-quality forages. The sooner heifers enter the milking herd, the sooner they become income-generating animals instead of being income-using animals. Also, younger-calving heifers (24-26 months of age) properly grown will produce more milk over their lifetime.

**Bottom line:** Tape or weigh your heifers to see what they actually weigh.

**Old Wives' Tale #4: Trace mineral blocks provide adequate amounts of minerals for heifers and dry cows.**

**Fact:** Consuming adequate amounts of trace minerals is very important for proper growth and for a good immune system to fight-off disease challenges, such as mastitis. Two separate problems exist when feeding trace mineral blocks to cattle. First, cattle often do not consume enough of the block to receive the minerals needed. Secondly, these blocks may contain sources of the trace minerals which are unavailable to the heifer or dry cow (for example, copper oxide). Thus, the heifer or dry cow does not receive the amount of each trace mineral needed for growth and proper disease resistance.

**Bottom Line:** Include the proper amount of a good-quality "loose" mineral in the grain mix fed to heifers and the dry cows.