



## Feeding the herd to prepare for breeding

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Most farms are just catching breath after the peak calving period. However, it is important to look ahead to the coming breeding season, and make sure that the herd is in good nutritional status ahead of the start date for mating.

- In late March, check the body condition score (BCS) of cows calved for three weeks or more. The target is to have all cows at 2.75 or above in one month's time. Are cows too thin, or beginning to 'turn the corner' and gain weight?
- Very thin individual cows can be milked once a day until the start of breeding. This will help to recover BCS before breeding starts. Overall milk losses will be small.
- If the whole herd is looking thin, check the daily feed allowance. Post-grazing height should be at 3.5-4cm for the end of the first round, but it is vital that cows are also on a rising plane of nutrition. Consult your Teagasc adviser for feeding options.
- Make sure that later-calving dry cows are fed correctly to minimise problems. Continue to feed the correct amount of minerals. Offer lower-energy forage to prevent excess weight gain.
- If there is a history of mineral issues on the farm, take some fresh grass samples from second round paddocks for analysis. Sample four to five representative paddocks and adjust April-May mineral supplementation if needed.

## Grants for energy efficiency

The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) has just launched a €500,000 grant scheme for energy efficient vacuum and milk pumps. Up to 40% of total technology and installation costs may be covered by the grant. The technologies covered under the scheme include variable speed drive (VSD) vacuum pumps and VSD milk pumps. Further information is available on the SEAI website [www.seai.ie](http://www.seai.ie) or by contacting your Teagasc adviser.



## Early turnout of replacement heifers

Early spring grass can support liveweight gains of up to 1.0kg per head per day. Make sure that the lightest heifers have priority access to

the best grass, as they have the most ground to make up.

If grass becomes scarcer during March, supplementation with 1-2kg of a cereal such as rolled barley will help to sustain continued growth.

## Milk recording for increased sustainability

Milk recording identifies poor performing cows in your herd. Culling these animals will have a limited effect on total herd yield. While the focus has been on growing herd size, now is the time to consolidate the herd though identifying the best performing cows. This can have an impact in several ways:

1. Increased milk solids produced – better performing cows are retained.
2. Increased grass availability – grass is prioritised for the better performing cows.
3. Less cows will mean less time spent milking.
4. Less stock will have to be accommodated, less slurry to be stored and spread, and less silage required for the winter period.



*Milk recording allows you to give better performing cows priority access to grass.*

5. Better replacements – through breeding from the best cows (with the poor performers being bred to beef).
6. Reduced antibiotic usage – through the use of selective dry cow treatment.

Remember that the first milk recording should take place within six weeks of the start of calving. Have you booked your first milk recording for 2019 yet?

## Dry period performance

Now is a good time to review the effectiveness of your drying off strategy, so as to identify what worked, what didn't, and if there are areas that could be improved on next time.

### 1. Clinical mastitis: how many cases did you have during the dry period, and within the first month of calving?

The target within the first month of calving is to have less than five cases of clinical mastitis for every 100 cows calved. If the rate in your herd is higher, you need to investigate.

### 2. Milk recording results: how many infected cows were cured over the dry period, and how many cows or heifers picked up new infections?

Regular milk recording will provide the answers to these questions. The CellCheck Farm Summary Report helps you track these results easily:



- “New infection over the dry period” – shows the percentage of cows that were uninfected at the last recording before dry off (SCC <200K), that are now infected at their first recording post calving (SCC >200K); and,
- “Cure rate over the dry period” – investigates the percentage of cows cured over the dry period, i.e., cows that were infected (SCC >200K) on the last recording before drying off, and are now uninfected, or cured (SCC <200K).

Talk to your Teagasc adviser, veterinary surgeon or co-op milk adviser for further guidance.

## HEALTH & SAFETY

### Maternal cows can be deadly

Cow- and heifer-related farm deaths account for 50% of all livestock fatalities and 7% of all farm deaths. An Irish medical study indicated that 65% of non-fatal livestock-related injuries were cow related, leading to an average hospital stay of 10 days. A further medical study recently described the force of being attacked by a cow as similar to being struck by a juggernaut. Spring time, when newly born calves are being handled or treated, is a particularly high risk period. The key safety message is to create a sound physical barrier



when treating or tagging calves. Also, maternal aggressiveness is a heritable trait, so don't breed from such cows.



Calves can be turned out at three weeks old if they have a dry lie and shelter.

being unable to cope with variable weather conditions. However, research has shown that calves can be turned out at three weeks of age provided that they have access to a dry lie and shelter. Many farmers provide this by facilitating calves with a return to their indoor accommodation (free access to paddock adjacent to the shed) or by providing shelter in the paddock (reared outdoors). If calves being reared outdoors become ill or begin to show signs of ill thrift, they should be returned indoors for treatment.

## Turning calves out to grass

There is a reluctance by most dairy farmers to turn calves out early, due to a fear of calves

## Contract rearing: a win-win opportunity

Contracting out calves to a contract rearer from two weeks of age will reduce labour and calf accommodation requirements. However, some dairy and drystock farmers prefer that the calves are weaned before leaving the dairy farm. At present, there is high interest from drystock farmers in contract rearing. This provides a big opportunity for dairy farmers to select excellent drystock farmers to rear their next generation stock. Teagasc drystock advisers are working with many of these farmers across the country, focussing on best practice for rearing heifers through using the best protocols for grassland, breeding and animal health management. Contact your local Teagasc office for more information on contract rearing.

## PastureBase app available now



PastureBase Ireland (PBI) recently launched its new offline app, which is available for both iPhone and Android smart devices. Teagasc encourages PBI users to download this free app and start using it. If you wish to join PBI or have any queries on the offline app, please feel free to contact us at any time on 046-920 0965 or support@pbi.ie.