

Top five tips for March

Edited by

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1. **Milk recording:** record within 60 days of the first cow calving, e.g., if first calving took place on January 25, record by March 25. This will help to identify and address problem cows early. Check for repeat offenders and assess how effective your dry period treatment programme was.
2. **Early turnout:** maiden heifers need to be at target weight for breeding (290-330kg for JEX, FR, Hol FR) for maximum fertility performance. Early turnout of light heifers to grass along with 2kg of concentrate will deliver a gain of >1kg per day to facilitate hitting target weights.
3. **Vaccination:** recent advice suggests moving vaccination dates to during the dry period; however, if vaccinations need to be completed for 2023, it is recommended to have them done at least one month ahead of breeding. Remember, maiden heifers need to get two shots, so factor this into your scheduling.
4. **Assess body condition:** cows that lose >0.5 body condition score (BCS) in early lactation have reduced reproductive performance. Condition score now to identify thin cows that should be put on once-a-day (OAD) milking to improve condition. Late-calving cows (March 25 onwards) should also be milked OAD if you wish to retain them for the 2024 milking year.
5. **Pick your AI bull team for breeding:** Teagasc Breeding Week takes place from March 20-24 and will cover identifying your breeding goals, identifying AI sires, and using Sire Advice to allocate sires to help you achieve your goals, along with lots of other information on all things breeding.

Weaning calves successfully

During the first weeks of life, the calf is entirely dependent on milk as a source of nutrition, with the digestion of milk occurring in the abomasum. Young calves have little to no rumen capacity in early life. Careful nutritional management before weaning ensures that the rumen develops to allow the transition to an entirely solid diet. Successful weaning is a balancing act between achieving an adequate growth rate and promoting rumen development. Here are some feeding tips to develop the rumen in advance of weaning:

- calves must have access to clean, palatable starter concentrates as soon as possible, even though they will only eat small amounts in the first three weeks of life;
- providing a small amount fresh every day reduces wastage, encourages calves to eat and allows you to monitor intakes;
- calves fed coarse starter mixes initially eat more and have greater weight gain than calves fed pelleted starters – the coarseness is also of benefit for the growth of the muscle layers in the rumen wall; and,
- in addition to ration, calves need to drink water to help ensure bacterial growth. A calf requires four to five litres of water for



every 1kg of concentrates, so provide calves with clean, fresh water at all times.

Weaning should begin only in a healthy calf that is consuming at least 1kg concentrate feed per day. Don't water down milk replacer or whole milk prior to weaning. Instead, reduce the volume fed. If calves are being fed manually more than once a day, the first move is to change to once-a-day feeding. This is best to do approximately one month prior to weaning to allow calves time to adjust to the new regime and further develop their rumen prior to reducing total liquid feed amount. Once they are accustomed to one feed daily and consuming 1kg of concentrates consistently, the reduction in milk feeding can begin. In automatic feeding systems, calves can be weaned more gradually. The weaning protocol again starts about a month before weaning and the amount fed is reduced gradually until they are weaned. Target weaning weights for replacement heifers are based on their mature weights (**Table 1**). Weaning can safely take place when the heifer has reached approximately 15% of her target mature weight.

Table 1: Predicted mature weight and target weaning weight of replacement heifers of different maintenance sub-indices.

Maintenance sub index	€0	€10	€20
Mature cow weight (kg)	640	590	540
Target weaning weight (kg)	94	88	82

March grazing targets

Grazing has gone well during February. Many farmers on dry land will have reached the 25-30% target grazed by March 1. The aim is to have about 65% of the farm grazed by St Patrick's Day according to the spring rotation planner.

Regrowth levels have to be tracked on the farm from mid March. The primary time for an increased level of grass growth will be the third and fourth weeks of March. Look at the paddocks grazed early – this will tell you what grass recovery has taken place. There will need to be four to five paddocks with a good level of grass recovery to gain knowledge as to when the second rotation can begin in April.

For those who measure grass, the average farm cover should not drop below 550kg DM/ha at any time during the first rotation, otherwise grass growth will be compromised.

Follow grass growth rates on the PastureBase Ireland website: www.pbi.ie.

Ground conditions

As long as ground conditions are adequate underfoot, grazing can take place. When

ground conditions are difficult, practices have to be put in place to keep grass in the diet of the cow without causing serious damage to the land. These practices include:

- grazing for a few hours after each milking;
- using different entry and exit points to paddocks;
- grazing low covers of grass in difficult grazing conditions; and,
- using grazing techniques that minimise damage to land.

Fertiliser/slurry

It is important to keep grass growing on the farm. Grass will need to recover after grazing and be ready to graze again in the first half of April; therefore, nitrogen (N) fertiliser and slurry need to be spread. The target is to have about 60 units/acre of N (slurry N and fertiliser N in total) applied to most paddocks by early April. This N target can be achieved through a combination of slurry (about eight units N/1,000 gallons) and fertiliser.



Select your best cows to breed replacement heifers

Each year at this time, dairy AI bull selection is discussed in great detail and rightly so, but what about dam selection? The genetic potential of heifers comes from both sire and dam; therefore, mating your best females to dairy AI is as important as selecting the correct bull team. As

always, there should be particular focus placed on the maiden heifers, as these should be your highest genetic merit animals. The question is how many cows do you need to breed to dairy AI to produce enough replacements and how do you select them?

1. **Economic Breeding Index (EBI):** EBI is a single figure profit index used to identify the most profitable bulls and cows for breeding dairy herd replacements. Pay particular attention to individual traits that are low and need improving. If you are looking to improve lifetime milk solids performance, select cows that are highly ranked within the herd on the milk and fertility sub-indexes.
2. **Milk recording:** milk recorded lifetime reports illustrate both performance and profit

of cows within the herd. Cows are ranked within lactation number based on milk-recorded lifetime performance. Analysis of multiple herds shows that EBI for milk sub-index, fat percentage and protein percentage are strong drivers of actual performance.

Use all information at hand to identify your best cows for breeding heifers. Your Teagasc advisor is available to help with developing a breeding plan.

HEALTH & SAFETY



Check gates and fences

Are your fences stockproof along public roads? Animals getting onto roads is a major hazard to traffic with high potential for serious injury. The Animals Act 1985 places a strong duty on farmers to prevent stock from getting onto roads. March is an opportune time to check fencing along public roads ahead of turnout of stock. Hedging cannot be relied upon to keep stock contained in all cases, so fencing may be needed. If growth conditions are poor at this time of year, a 'hungry period' can arise causing animals to stray. Use of a gate-stopping device (see picture) to stop a gate swinging outwards is also a worthwhile safety device along public roads.

March is undoubtedly one of the busiest farming months, so work organisation and

getting adequate rest are crucial to prevent rushing and farm injuries. Take particular care around tractors and machines, and cows calving or with calves.



Have secure gates and fences.