

Caring for your heifers

Your calves have grown and you now have to plan for the future of your herd. This is done by giving your heifers the best care possible, because they will become the cows that supply you with milk and give birth to new calves!

Heifers can remain outside as long as the weather and ground conditions allow it. But they must have access to adequate supplementary feed and some form of shelter. In many cases it is more convenient to house heifers in loose housing. If a cubicle system is used, you should adapt it so that the heifers are prepared for future cow housing.

Getting your heifer pregnant

Heifers should be artificially inseminated at 15 months, which means that they will calve at two years (24 months) of age. There are different target weights for heifers from different breeds. It is very important that your heifer has achieved her target weight when she is inseminated. Ask your veterinarian or feed consultant for a table setting out your heifer's ideal weight.

Heifers that calve under 21 months and after 27 months, often have more difficult calvings. The ideal calving time for heifers, is between the ages of 23 and 27 months. Feed your heifer adequately for four weeks before and four weeks after insemination.

Things to remember

- Heifers that graze on grass, can easily get internal parasites. If you do not have clean pasture available, a worm control programme should be applied. Discuss this with your veterinarian.
- In late summer, pregnant heifers are very susceptible to summer mastitis. You need to have control measures in place. Once again, ask your veterinarian to help you.
- Do not introduce big changes in housing or diet, especially around the insemination period. A stressed heifer will struggle to conceive and will not become pregnant.
- Your heifers should be marked to allow you and the handler to easily identify them.
- Heifers should be placed in the dairy herd with care, at least four weeks before calving, to allow them to become used to their new surroundings. If space is limited, they should not be housed with older cows, who will dominate their feeding and lying areas.
- Pregnant heifers should not be allowed to become too fat. This can cause milk production to drop.
- In the last two months of pregnancy, heifers should be observed carefully at least twice per day. Check for bleeding or any other abnormal signs, and contact the veterinarian if you notice any of these signs.
- Heifers should always be housed in clean, dry conditions, or graze in a convenient, accessible field. 