

A photograph of a brown cow in a barn. The cow is in the foreground, and a person's hand is visible on the right side, reaching towards the cow. The barn has a wooden structure with a corrugated metal roof.

# What To Expect When Your Cow Is Expecting

Pre, During and Postpartum Considerations for calving your family milk cow.

@CHEESE\_FROM\_SCRATCH\_  
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# 01 Introduction

I grew up on a cattle ranch and have assisted in calf births for my entire life. When I became an adult, married my husband and became a cattle rancher myself, I took a lot of the skills I learned growing up, for granted. Sure, you are never done learning, but sometimes you know just enough, and that is how I feel my knowledge lands on this subject.

I don't know everything, but I know enough to get by until I can ask, look it up, or call the vet. That is what my goal is for this resource, to give you the knowledge to feel empowered and confident enough to get it done, but also have the knowledge to know when to ask for help.

In this resource we will be looking at the steps leading up to calving. I will be covering the most common questions I get about pregnancy, calving and postpartum. It is the what to expect when you are expecting, cow edition!

## 02 How Do I know she is pregnant?

There are many ways to pregnancy test a cow. You can see a few of them listed below here. A lot of times I hear from people who bought a pregnant cow only to find out later that they were either due sooner than they thought, or not even pregnant at all! A few key points to keep in mind are, that if a very early pregnancy test was done (4-6weeks), you will probably want to repeat one before either buying or drying her up. Cows can miscarry and at early stages it can be easy to miss.

As I mentioned above, I hear a lot of misinformed dates when it comes to people buying pregnant cows. Accidents seem to happen on the farm, (Putting my hand up here, because I know about this first hand), cows can get in with bulls, bulls can get in with cows and unless the cow was physically serviced on a certain date, dates can be wrong.

### **Ways to see if your cow is pregnant**

- Internal Palpation or Ultrasound- Great for determining dates
- Lab Blood Test- An easy, inexpensive, do it your self test
- Home Blood Test
- External Palpation- Also known as bumping the calf. Usually can't be achieved until 7-8 months.
- Urine Test- From what I have heard, these can be inaccurate.
- No signs of heat- This pregnancy confirming method can be tricky with some cows, especially ones that don't present with tons of heat signs. On the other hand, if you have your cow in with a bull, and he is not showing any interest over an entire cycle, she is probably pregnant.





## 03 *Keeping Your Cow Healthy Through Pregnancy*

It is very important that your pregnant cow has a healthy pregnancy. Not only does this set the calf up for success, but full bred dairy cows are very susceptible to postpartum problems. It is important to monitor their body condition and make adjustments to their diets as needed.

A cow will need to be dried up for calving at least 60 days prior to their due date. If they are going into this dry up period over conditioned, you don't want to make it too much longer than 60 days, but if they are lower body condition, you may need to dry them up sooner.

As far as diet goes, some people are surprised to learn that dry cows, even pregnant dry cows, have lower protein and energy requirements than lactating cows. That doesn't mean they don't need good feed though! Pregnant cows do have high protein requirements and should be offered good quality feed, as well as free choice mineral supplements.



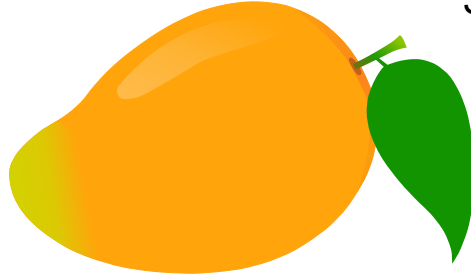
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# Stages of Pregnancy



## 2 Months

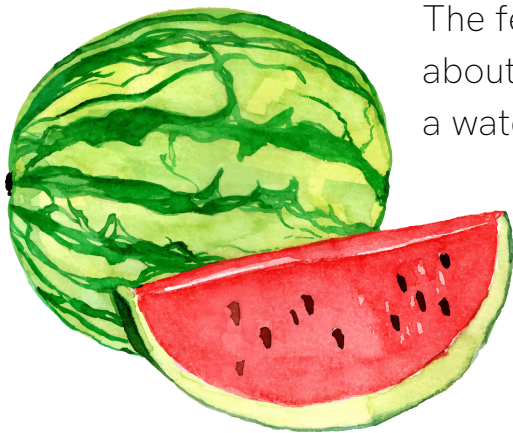
The fetus is about the size of a avocado.



## 3 Months

The fetus is about the size of a mango.

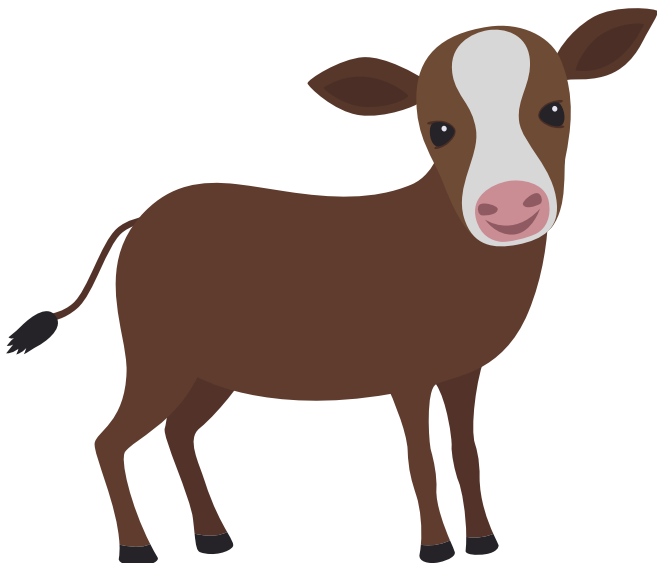
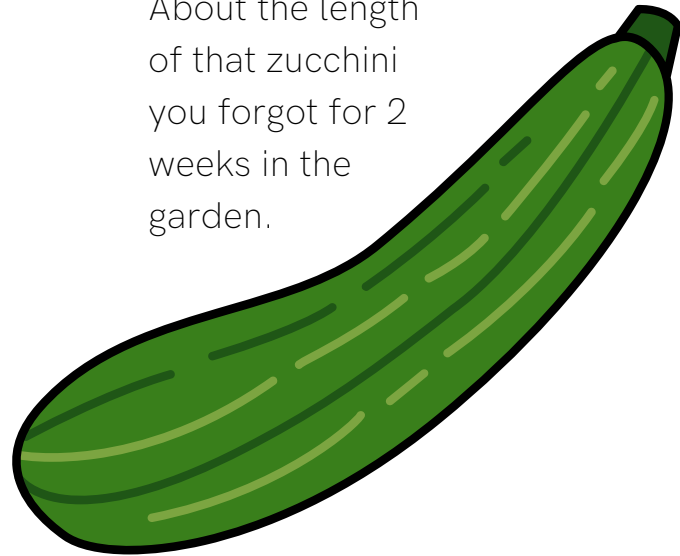
## 4-5 Months



The fetus is about the size of a watermelon.

## 5-6 Months

About the length of that zucchini you forgot for 2 weeks in the garden.



## 6-9 Months

The calf will grow about 70% of its total birth weight in the last 90 days before calving. The cow should be dried up at least 60 days before calving, and more if body condition is low.



## 05 Drying Your Cow Up For Calving

There are many opinions on how to properly dry your cow up for calving. I go more in-depth in the milkmaid society on other options like dry off medications (which do not actually dry your cow off, rather prevent mastitis). In this next section, I briefly touch on drying up your cow and how to do it.

### Why Should I Dry My Cow Up Before Calving?

**Cows need a break from producing milk to:**

- Build up their body condition
- Give their bodies and udders a break from producing milk
- To reset and restart producing colostrum for their next calf
- To utilize their energy to grow that baby! Remember calves grow 70% in the last 90 days of gestation!



## *How Does It Work?*

When a cow is dried up her body will signal her to stop producing milk and eventually any milk that is still in the udder, will be reabsorbed into the cows body. After only 16 hours of milk being left in the udder, the cows body will signal her to reduce the secretion of the milk producing hormone prolactin.

## *How far before calving should I dry up my cow?*

It is usually recommended that this dry period be about 60 days. If your cow has lost significant condition during lactation (meaning they look like they need a break), you can aim for a dry period of up to 4 months. These timelines should be actual days dry, so keep in mind that the drying off procedure can take a few weeks and requires a bit of pre planning.

In a low producing cow, I will use a beef cow for an example, milking can be stopped virtually cold turkey, with no interventions, and a low risk of developing mastitis. This is not always the case, however, for high producing dairy cows, an example would be breeds like Jerseys or Holsteins. High producing cows will need monitoring, and sometimes slow weaning to help them transition into the dry period.

You can give a cow too long of a dry off period. This is something that Zach told me once and I scoffed at him! I remember the conversation going something like this, “Too long of a break! What a thing to say about my well deserving milk cow! She deserves a super long break for all that she does!”

Well.... turns out, they can have too long of a break. Cows that are already quite fat, can end up over conditioned and struggle with problems later on; large calves, difficult births, and many other health conditions can plague the fat cow. But fat cows do need a break too! They should be allowed their 60 days, and fed a well balanced diet that promotes a healthy cow and calf.

# *How to dry up your cow*

There are many different ways to dry off a milk cow. It seems that everyone has an opinion on the subject. Eventually you will develop a system that works for your family and your cow.

Something that I would really like you to keep in mind, is that if your cow is pregnant and due to calve in the next few months, she has probably already started to drop her production. Drying off before calving is a natural process. We often become very focused on making sure that our cows do not develop mastitis and the idea of not milking your cow can be terrifying if you have been paranoid about mastitis. Unless your cow is prone to mastitis, or is still producing very high amounts of milk (over 2-3 gallons of milk a day), she most likely will dry up fine, but if you are worried about it, consider a dry up medication. You can talk to your vet about them. Dry up medications or teat sealants don't dry up your cow, basically they are medications that prevent mastitis during the dry phase. It is also important to note that many of these dry off medications need a milk dumping period after your cow calves, before you and your family can safely consume the milk.

Whether you are choosing to use a dry up medication or not, weaning down your cows milk production is a beneficial tactic in making the dry up phase more comfortable and risk free for your cow. My feeling on the matter is, for the comfort of your cow, the more we can drop production before dry off day, the better!

So that brings us to step one of drying off your milk cow- Lower Production



## *Step 1- Lower Production*

### *Switch to once a day milking*

Try your best to lower your cows production to about 2 gallons of milk or less a day. If we haven't already, our first step during this phase is to move our cow down to once a day milking.

The reduction in milking will cause milk production to lower. We usually make the move far before we are thinking of drying our cow up, but we have done it in the past where we move them to once a day milking specifically because we will be drying them off in the next month or so.

### *Consider diet changes*

Another way to lower production is by lowering or stopping feeding grain for production, and by beginning to feed a low production diet. A low production diet will be different for everyone depending on what type of feed you have access to. For us, all we do is wean our milk cows off of grain. It is important to remember body condition scoring here, and to not be taking maintenance calories away from your cow, only production ones.

## *Step 2- Dry Off*

### *Option 1- Stop Cold Turkey*

If your cow is producing less than 2 gallons of milk a day, and is not prone to mastitis, you can probably just stop cold turkey. Many people do this successfully. The feeling of fullness in the udder will cause the cow to lower production and eventually she will absorb the fluid in her udder back into her body. During the natural process of drying up, cows udders have higher secretions of natural protective antibacterial substances, making the udder less favourable for bacterial growth. When they are producing lower amounts, these antibacterial substances are even more concentrated and more effective.

### *Option 2- Wean off Gradually*

Even if my cow is producing 2 gallons, I still like to wean her off milking gradually. I feel that it helps them have a more gradual stop in production, which keeps them from feeling overly engorged and uncomfortable. I know how that feels!

To wean them off of milking, I start by gradually moving milking times farther and farther apart taking a week or two to do so. For example, day 1 milk- as normal, day 2- stretch out milking a few hours, day 3- a few more hours, day 4- move to 48hours apart, and so on. After a few days of 48hour milking, I stop completely.

\*During this weaning off period, be wary of consuming the milk and I wouldn't recommend using it for cheesemaking.





## 06 *Getting Set Up for Calving*

Be prepared is my motto on the ranch! Living rurally, I feel like we need to take the "be prepared" mantra extra seriously. Though we do have vet access in our areas, wait times can be long and even impossible on the weekends and middle of the nights. That is why I like to keep everything we need for all sorts of emergency situations, available in my vet kits.

In this next section we will look at what it is I keep in my calving vet kits. Keep in mind that more in depth information on vet kits, monitoring and treatments are covered in the Milkmaid Society.

Depending on your location, and access to services you may need more or less than listed below. These lists should be used as a rough guideline to help you understand some of the equipment that is useful. That being said, I really recommend that everyone keep a emergency calving bucket stocked and on hand. Even if you do have good vet services in your area, sometimes emergency's happen and interventions need to happen quicker than the vet can arrive.

# 06 Calving Supplies

## EMERGENCY CALVING BUCKET

Fill a clean bucket with these things, in the event of an emergency you can fill the bucket up with warm soapy water and you have emergency essentials on hand for a quick assisted birth.

- ☐ Pulling Chains and Handles
- ☐ Flashlight
- ☐ Bucket
- ☐ Soap
- ☐ Old towels
- ☐ Long sleeve gloves
- ☐ Halter and Rope



## MEDICATION AND SOLUTIONS

If you have good access to a vet, you may need less of these things and if you have no access, you may need more! I have highlighted the extra important items in red.

- ☐ Iodine
- ☐ IV Calcium
- ☐ Lubricant
- ☐ Powdered Colostrum
- ☐ Powdered Electrolytes
- ☐ Metacam
- ☐ Antibiotics
- ☐ Selenium
- ☐ Vitamin A and D
- ☐ Oxytocin
- ☐ Frothy bloat aid (like bloaties)
- ☐ Dynamint cream



# 06 Calving Supplies

## INFRASTRUCTURE, AND SET

### UP

Infrastructure and set ups for calving can range anywhere from very fancy to very simple. We have a cattle chute on our ranch, but have also assisted births in the field or using a rope and a tree to restrain. Some of the things I mention here are for post birth and milking set up. I go more in-depth in the milkmaid society on how to set up for milking, but I thought I would list a few of the infrastructure things here.

- ☐ Warm dry place to keep a cold calf
- ☐ Place where you can restrain your cow for assisted births
- ☐ Calf puller (optional, but very helpful)
- ☐ Place to milk your cow post birth
- ☐ Place to lock up calf if considering calf sharing
- ☐ Place to store milk post calving

## CALVING VET SUPPLIES

This is not a full vet list (you can find one in the milkmaid society), rather a list containing the most used items around calving season.

- ☐ Emergency calving bucket with supplies
- ☐ Syringes and needles (various sizes)
- ☐ IV Tubing
- ☐ Bolus applicator
- ☐ Alcohol swabs
- ☐ Ketosis test strips
- ☐ Bottle and Nipple
- ☐ Calf Tuber
- ☐ Scalpel
- ☐ Bander and Rings
- ☐ Thermometer





## 07 Calving

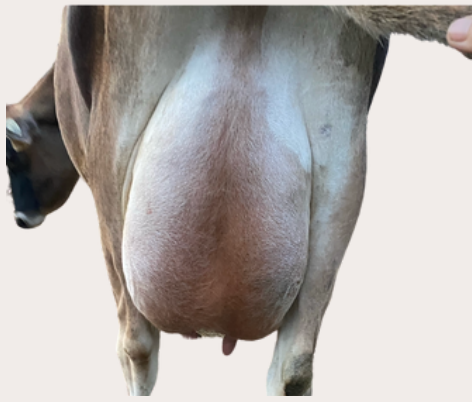
Calving season can be a stressful time. There is so much information out there, and it seems that you always hear the bad stories, not the good ones!

As your cow approaches calving season, remember this, there are more good stories than bad ones! In fact to set the mood for this exciting time, I thought I would share one of the funnier calving season stories I have.

One time Zach and I were coming home from town. It was calving season, we didn't often leave the ranch together and if we did, it was not for long. Our property was logged many years ago and never replanted with fir trees, consequently thin pine trees grow close together in patches. They are virtually impossible to get through on a horse and are a tight squeeze even on foot.

As we came down the driveway, he spotted a cow off by herself tucked in the pine trees. He parked the truck and walked the 50 feet from the driveway over to the trees to check on her. Our baby started crying and I reached back and pulled her out of the car seat. As I started to breastfeed her, I finally glanced over to see what Zach was up to. I laughed so hard I almost wet myself. There was Zach, town clothes on, one arm up to the armpit in a cow, following her around as she wandered through the pine trees trying to find her way out. Zach pulled the calf (turned out it was backwards), wiped his arm off on his town jeans and we continued on down the driveway. The calf was fine, and so was the mama!

As we move on into this next section, we will be looking at how to tell when your cow is getting close to calving, as well as the stages of labour.



## Bagging Up

Her udder will begin to fill up, and may even drip milk. Don't milk her, this is a normal process of her preparing for calving.

She is getting close



## Loses Mucus Plug

This can happen up to 2 weeks to a few days before calving, but is a sign that she is getting close.



## Springing of the Vulva

This loosening and swelling of the vulva is called "springing". I like to take photos of her backend in the few weeks prior to calving. This gives me a reference point for when things start to relax and swell.



## Pins Dropping

The loosening of the pins is an indication of impending calving. In the weeks coming up to calving you will feel this space loosen. Within 24 hours of calving these pins will appear to "drop" or disappear entirely, meaning that you will feel a gap in this space.

Typically  
Lasts 2-6  
Hours

## Stage 1 of Labour

# Labour

This first phase of labour occurs when contractions begin and follow a pattern. Just like a human, cows can have different rates of labour but this stage tends to take anywhere from 2-6 hours. Your cow may be restless, get up and down, she may stand off by herself away from the other animals. As things progress, the contractions will get more frequent and you may even see visible contractions. This stage ends when you see visible fetal membranes or water bag.

Typically Lasts  
30min-1 hour  
cows  
1-2 hours  
heifers

## Stage 2 of Labour

Once you see visible fetal membranes or a water bag, you know that the second stage of labour has begun. The calf enters the birth canal and before long you should see feet. The feet should be in a front facing position (if they appear to be upside down, that means you have a breach calf). Once the feet appear things should progress quickly. It is normal for the feet to go in and out a few times, but this stage should take no more than 30 min in cows and not much longer in heifers (first time calvers). If the calf presentation appears wrong, and/or it is taking too long, you will need to intervene and assist the birth.

Typically comes out  
around 2-6 hours  
but can take longer

## Stage 3 of Labour

Stage 3 occurs after the calf has been born and is the birth of the placenta. It most often occurs in the first few hours after birth but can take up to 24 hours to pass. If it takes longer than 24 hours it is considered a retained placenta.





## *Knowing When to intervene and when to call the vet*

The best advice I can give you for calving season is follow your gut. I have given you general timelines for labour above, but you are the one there with your cow and instinct and common sense are often the best tools you can use in emergency situations.

I really recommend knowing what your vet situation is, going into calving. Depending on where you live, you will have different access to vet care. Some people may be able to have a vet on the farm in as little as an hour, whereas some may have absolutely no access to vet care.

If you are the later, you really want to prepare yourself the best that you can by stocking emergency equipment, reading and watching up on things like how to pull a calf, and at the end of the day know that you are capable of making a big difference in an emergency situation. On our ranch, living rurally, we do the majority of our own emergency vet care. We know that if we are calling the vet, it will be hours before they get there. Off the top of my head, things that I absolutely would call the vet for are, twisted uterus, prolapse or anytime where the need for a c section was indicated. Like I said though, trust your gut, call the vet if you need them! Rely on neighbours that are knowledgeable! Always keep that "phone a friend card" in the back of your mind. Having a knowledgeable neighbour that can pop over and reassure you is an invaluable resource so I really recommend cultivating those relationships with your agriculture community.

# Taking care of the calf

Calves should have their first drink of colostrum within the first 1-2 hours of birth.

You can monitor that a calf has sucked by visually seeing it sucking, seeing that one or more of the teats is puckered and has been drunk from, feeling the calf's rumen to see if it feels full.

We give our calves selenium and vitamins A and D post calving as well as use a vaccine program. If you wish, talk to your vet about supplements and vaccines recommended for your area.



The calf will get up within about 30 min to an hour after birth. Calves can sometimes need assistance figuring out how to drink, especially if their mother is a first-time calver or her udder is low to the ground.

Post birth the cow will lick off her calf, this dries the calf off and stimulates them to get up. Sometimes first-time moms don't understand the program and you have to help them out, especially if it is cold out.

A healthy calf is vibrant, has bright eyes, a warm mouth, a good sucking reflex, pees and poops regularly and runs around and plays.

If your cow calves in a place that is wet, you can bring over dry bedding for the calf to lay in. Be cognizant of bringing over quality feed as bedding if you have other cows in the pen. They will come over for a snack, and this can disturb a new mom and baby.

Their umbilical cord will hang for a few weeks but will eventually dry and fall off. It is usually completely fine, but I do keep an eye on it as they can be prone to infection.

It is normal for calves with high butterfat-producing mothers to develop the "milk poops" after a few days that last up to a week or so, as they adjust to the rich milk. These poops may appear yellow and runny.

Keep an eye on your calf and make sure they continue to eat, drink and appear otherwise healthy.

Scours is a common problem with calves. It is basically diarrhea for calves and can be caused by bacteria or viruses. It is important if you notice changes in your calf's poop to monitor them and talk to your vet if you are worried. Calves can become sick quickly with scours and it often requires electrolyte or even antibiotic treatment depending on the cause and severity.



# 08 Expectations For The Postpartum Days





# Expectation 1- You Will Need to milk your cow at some point

One of the most common questions I get in the postpartum phase is, "When should I milk?." This will be different for everyone. You will find a lot of mixed opinions here so I will tell you what you can do, and you can pick an option that works best for you.

For the first 24-48 hours your cow will have colostrum in her udder. This is the most important food for the calf, it will set them up for success in their lives. Because of this, even if I am not planning on calf sharing, I usually still let the calf stay with the mom for the first few days so that it can feed as much as it needs to. Your cow will make more colostrum than the calf can consume though, and this means that if you like, you can take some.

**Option 1-** Don't milk your cow until her milk comes in, this is usually 2 days after giving birth. This is completely fine, as long as they have a calf on them, they will not be at any higher risk of developing mastitis. If you have a cow that is prone to milk fever, not milking for the first few days can actually limit the occurrence of milk fever, because the feeling of a full udder will make the calcium shift more gradual.

**Option 2-** Start a twice a day milking routine even while she still has colostrum. This is usually the option that we do. The reason for this, is that we like having colostrum around to use on our ranch. After our cow has calved, we will give her time to bond with her calf, rest and recuperate after the birth. When our usual milking time roles around, we will take some of the colostrum. At this point it is not about emptying her, the calf still needs to have some colostrum, but it is about reducing some of the pressure on her udder, and keeping some of the colostrum to freeze. Colostrum will be a yellow, almost florescent colour at first. It may have blood streaks in it, be stained pink, or even be very red. This red is due to burst blood vessels from edematous udders. When collecting colostrum in those first few days, I always label the freezer bags with first milking, second milking, third milking ect. When using the frozen colostrum, know that the colostrum from the first milking will be the best for newborn calves.

## *Expectation 2- Your Cow will birth her placenta*

Cleaning out is the term used to describe the cow birthing the placenta. This usually happens within the first 2-6 hours after birth, but it can take longer, especially if there were complications with calving, like having to pull the calf, your cow is over conditioned or under conditioned, or your cow is predisposed to retained placenta.

After 24 hours if the placenta has not released, it is considered a retained placenta and you should be monitoring for signs of infection. As long as you don't see any signs of infection or any other problems, the most common treatment is just time and monitoring. If you are worried, you can speak to your vet, or if you see any signs of infection, give your vet a call.

Placentas can take up to a week to be expelled and as long as they are not causing infection, that is ok. Also keep in mind that cows will eat their placentas, as will other animals like dogs and birds, there is always a chance that she has cleaned out on her own, but the placenta has been eaten.

# Expectation 3- You will need to monitor your milk cow for common problems

You should always be on high alert in the postpartum days for common dairy cow prone ailments. If you have a hardy breed of milk cow, like a beef cross breed, the instances of these things are much less common and you don't have to worry as much. Any cow can develop problems like infection though, so you should still be on alert and monitoring, even if you have a hardy cow.

## Signs of Infection

- Fever
- Lack of appetite
- Depressed
- Lethargic

## Common Postpartum Ailments to watch for

- Milk fever
- Mastitis
- Ketosis
- Displaced Abomasum

\*In the Milkmaid Society, we go in-depth into each of these topics and talk about normal verses abnormal vital signs in cows.



# Expectation 4- Milking will not be easy at first

I can't reiterate this enough, and I wish I didn't have to, but in the interest of being super honest..... It won't be easy... not for the first few weeks that is.

Its going to be hard, and I think that this idea, will help you prepare. Whether this is your first time having a postpartum cow, first time milking a cow, or you are a seasoned milkmaid, its hard at first.

What To Expect During The First Milking's

- **The Udder will be Full even after you are done milking.** At least for the first week or so. Many first time cow owners are worried about making sure that their cow is completely emptied out after milking. If you have never owned a cow before, and are learning to milk, as well as learning to take care of a postpartum cow, you may find yourself worried that her udder feels full even though you can't get any more milk out! After a cow calves, she holds a lot of edema (fluid that's trapped in the tissues ). This retained fluid will eventually disperse after the first week or so. But during that first week, don't be surprised if she still feels full even after you can't get anything out!
- **Its sometimes hard to get the milk out.** This can be on all quarters or just one and can be caused by a few things. For starters, she is not going to like being separated from her calf. (See "hormones are raging" on the next page, for tips on that) and she will probably hold milk back for the calf, You can try getting the calf to suck on her, and induce letdown before jumping in yourself. As well, the edema will make it harder to get the milk out. During that first week, its more about doing the best you can, than actually successfully milking her completely out. If you are calf sharing, encourage the calf to focus on quarters that you are struggling with, as well you can try warm compresses and unfortunately the big "P", patience, helps a lot. If you are not calf sharing and are worried that she is not emptied, do the best you can, and then rub her udder and teats with dynamint cream. This will discourage mastitis.

Cont.

## *Cont. Expectation 4- Milking will not be easy at first*

- **Everything is loose.** She will probably poop in the milking stall, so be ready. It probably has to do with a combination of, can't hold it in, hormones are raging, and she thinks you are annoying. Keep a old garbage can near by to tuck under her when that tail goes up.
- **Hormones are raging.** Even the nicest cows get a little crazy in those hormone infused days after giving birth. She will probably bellow for her calf, hold back her milk, kick at the bucket and swat you in the face with her tail. If she is having serious calf separation anxiety, you can try bringing the calf in with you while you milk or putting it in a place where she can see it. Know that bringing the calf in with you is not a long term solution, eventually that calf is going to get a lot bigger and pushy. Its a great option though in those first few days when you are just trying to get it done!
- **Its ok to cry.** No shame ever! We have all cried at the base of the udder. I still do it sometimes! Nothing says frustrating like learning to milk a cow, not to mention a newly postpartum cow.
- **There will be things in her milk.** It is normal to have tissue shedding in the milk up to 6 weeks postpartum.
- **Her Milk will start to come in on about day 2.** We usually don't drink the milk until day 5 or 6 though. Even when the milk comes in, there are still traces of colostrum. Its not harmful to consume, well that depends who you talk to, milk in the first week does have a high somatic cell count, but more than anything, it just doesn't taste that good in the first week and it will give you trouble if you try to turn it into cheese.

## *Expectation 5- You will have to milk twice a day*

Even if you are calf sharing, high production cows (that is full breed dairy cows like jersey's, holsteins ect.) will need to be milked twice a day once their milk comes in. That is even if they are calf sharing. Don't get me wrong, there are exceptions to this rule, but if you want to keep your cow healthy and in good high production, you often have to milk them twice a day for awhile. Peak production hits around 60 days, and after this peak has come and gone, you can start thinking about moving your cow down to once a day milking. If you are calf sharing, this time frame may be shorter, it just depends on how much milk the calf is able to handle. Sometimes you will see calves able to handle one of the milkings by the time they are 2 weeks old, other times it will take them up to 2 months.





## 09 Calf Sharing

A few days after giving birth, your cow's milk will start to come in. At this point with a high production dairy cow, they will have a lot of milk. More milk than a few day old calf can handle on their own! It will take weeks, if not a few months, before the calf is large enough to handle all of the milk.

Consider that a high production dairy cow reaches peak lactation around 6 weeks. As the calf grows, so does the milk production and as your cow is still headed towards peak lactation, there is a lot of milk during this time.

For me, it usually takes at least 1-2 months before the calf is large enough to handle one of the milking on their own. During this first few months of calf sharing, the calf stays on the mother 24/7 and is only separated while the mother is in the milking stall. Even though the calf is on the mother constantly, she still has a lot of milk for me twice a day. Often times, you will see that the calf prefers one or two of the quarters and you will notice that you don't get as much milk from these quarters.

During this time, I don't strip out my cow completely. I milk her almost all the way out, but when it comes to making sure every last drop is gone, I leave that to the calf. Calves are very efficient at emptying udders and they leave you with a bit of an insurance policy that yes the udder will be completely emptied out. If you have been terrified of your cow developing mastitis, because you didn't empty her out completely, calf sharing will set your mind at ease! The cow has most likely held back milk for the calf anyway, and that calf will strip her out well.

# When can I switch to once a day milking while calf sharing?

There will come a point when you have to start separating the calf from the cow, to get any milk. This is your natural indication that the calf has grown large enough to handle one of the milking's. Depending on the cow and calf, this will happen a few weeks to a few months after birth. If you are calf sharing because you want a relief milker, you have reached your destination! The calf is large enough to handle a milking while you go away.

If you want milk for yourself though, you will need to start locking the calf up for 6-12 hours before milking. For us, we usually make this easy by locking the calves in an adjoining pen at night. Before bed we go down and lock up the calf, then in the morning we take however much milk we want, before reuniting the cow and calf for the day.

For me, it is important if I am going to be reuniting the cow and calf directly after milking, that I leave some milk back for the calf. If you strip your cow out completely, you will want to leave the cow and calf separated for a few hours so that she can refill. A hungry calf that has been locked up all night will be ravenous and can damage the teats. Some calves are more prone to this than others. (One time we even had to float a calf's teeth because he had sharp points on them.) The fact is, when they are hungry they can be aggressive and if they are sucking on empty teats or not getting enough milk when they are hungry, this could cause problems.

# *How Long Should I Calf Share For?*

This depends a lot on your homestead, what your goals are for the calf and breeding timelines.

A cow can keep a calf on her for up to a year. You will want to wean her at least a few months before she calves again. Some cows, not all of them, will actually wean their calves themselves. Often times calves can be persistent, however, and will need to be separated from their mother to be weaned. If you are planning on keeping the calf around for awhile keep in mind that even after months of being separated, a calf may still drink from its mother after being reunited. Usually after a few years, they loose this bad habit, but not always. We have had cows drink from cows. It is a problem that only a fence can fix.

If separating the calf from its mother is impossible, you can consider a nose weaner. These are devices that go into the calfs nose and when the calf try's to drink, the nose weaner pokes the cow and keeps the cow from letting them drink. Calves can be clever though, and they can figure out how to flip the nose weaner up and drink around them.

If you are planning on keeping your calf as a heifer, or as a beef calf, the longer it can stay on its mother the better. 8 months to a year is about the maximum that a calf should be staying on its mother, but this time frame will give you a large healthy calf, albeit in those last months you can say goodbye to your milk supply. Unless separated the calf will drink it all!

We usually wean our calves around 6 months of age, this results in a large calf and at this point they can be getting harder to deal with in terms of locking up and separating.



# Conclusion

I created this resource because I know first hand how confusing and scary calving can seem. There is so much to know, and it can be a struggle to understand what it is you need to know, as well as what you need to keep on hand. I hope that this resource has covered a few of the questions you may have about preparing for calving season.

As my own cow approaches her calving, I am preparing my home not only to welcome a new calf, but also to welcome an influx of milk, a new cheesemaking season, and all of the beauty and chaos that comes with these things.

Robyn ♡







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