



Nutrition for suckler cows as they approach calving

Optimising nutrition for suckler cows during the latter stages of pregnancy will maintain their body condition and health at this critical time and in turn improve health, welfare and performance of the calf.

There are many problems associated with poor nutrition management, over feeding a cow is costly in terms of complications with slow calving due to reduced muscle tone and often a weak calf.

Cows that are too thin can also have problems around calving, with metabolic disorders, poor quality colostrum and milk supply.

Nutrition is a key cost and so by managing the cow effectively the body condition reserves built up at grass can help reduce feed costs during the winter months.

Cows should be around condition score 2.5-3 at calving and grouping them according to their condition well in advance will aid feeding management – ideally into three groups, fat, normal and thin.

The correct condition can be achieved by restricted feeding - knowing what the requirements for each group are and how much you need to meet these requirements is a good place to start. It is worth getting a nutritionist to help analyse the feed and work out the rations. A minimum of 90g/kgDM (9%) of crude protein is required by the cow to maximise the digestibility of forage.

One unit of BCS is worth around 13 per cent of the cow's liveweight and any change in BCS should be a gradual one to minimise any further complications. Therefore, pre-calving nutrition should start four months before calving. It will take about 160 days to lose a condition score with a daily loss of 0.5kg.

For autumn calving cows the best way to manage body condition is by adjusting stocking rates and feeding straw.

Minerals are essential through the pre-calving period, during most of the pregnancy a standard beef cow mineral will suffice but cows (and calves) require high levels of Magnesium, Selenium, Vitamin E and Iodine during the last month.

Two weeks before cows calve they may also benefit from an extra supplement such as soya to provide the extra energy and protein for colostrum production.

Regular monitoring will show if the feeding regime is working and changes made accordingly.

| | FAT | NORMAL | THIN |
|----------|------------|-----------------|-------------------|
| | 650kg cow | 650kg cow | 650kg cow |
| | -0.5kg/day | No loss or gain | gaining 0.5kg/day |
| Silage* | 20 | 25 | 32 |
| Straw | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| Barley | - | - | - |
| Minerals | 0.15 | 0.15 | 0.15 |

* Note this is an average 10ME silage, amounts will vary according to silage quality

Take a look at the BRP manual on [Feeding the Suckler Cow and her cow for Better Returns](#) for more information.