

Feeding first-calved heifers

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A considerable amount of work has been done around enabling heifers to calve at 24 months of age. Many farmers comment that heifers calving at this age struggle to get back in calf and do not perform well after calving, however, there are plenty of other farms that manage this well – so how do they do it?

First of all, it is important to ensure that heifers have reached 65% of their mature body weight at mating and 85% of mature body weight at calving. A cow is considered to have reached mature body weight when she has had three calves and this can be calculated at a herd level by taking an average weight of the cull cows that have previously been sold. The second key point is to ensure that heifers are not over-fat at calving (body condition score 3-3.5) as this can result in difficulties due to increased internal fat. It is also important that body condition loss after calving is minimised and ensuring heifers are not over-fat at calving will help prevent this.

After calving, the nutrient demands of first calvers is greater than that of mature cows because they are still growing as well as maintaining themselves and lactating. They should therefore be treated as priority animals. In a spring calving system, first heifers should be separated from the main herd where possible to avoid competition and given preferential access to better quality grazing. In rotational grazing systems, move them around in front of older cows and when set stocking choose a pasture which has younger, more productive grasses and possibly some clover, depending on availability.



In an autumn calving system, or if grazing is unsuitable for turnout, heifers should receive the best quality forage post-calving. It is important to get forage and feed analysed so that feeding can be targeted to the animal's requirements. Silage with ME 11MJ/kg DM is ideal for heifers after calving. Clover silages are a good source of quality protein, which will help growth and milk production. If only poorer quality forage is available then supplementation should be considered, including digestible fibre as well as a protein source, for example sugar beet pulp and rape/soya, or distillers' by-products.

I have worked with two farmers who manage their first lactation heifers well. One has a spring calving herd where heifers are bulled separately. This reduces stress and has helped improve fertility. Once the heifers calve, they are separated from the main herd for priority grazing, which has enabled careful monitoring, less competition and the ability to supplement if necessary depending on grass availability. The second farmer has spring and autumn calving cows and has only recently started calving his heifers at 24 months old. After calving, they are managed in separate groups to allow careful monitoring, supplementary feeding and closer observation.

It is important to continually monitor the body condition of first-calving heifers throughout the cycle. This will enable farmers to judge whether their nutritional requirements are being met and whether feed levels need to be adjusted.

More information regarding the nutritional requirements of suckler cows can be found in the Better Returns Programme manuals, [Feeding Suckler Cows and Calves for Better Returns](#) and [Managing Replacement heifers for Better Returns](#).