

Nutrition around calving time

Calving time can be hectic, but it is important that the nutrition of freshly calved cows is given careful consideration.

A freshly calved cow has to:

- ⇒ Recover from calving
- ⇒ Produce increasing amounts of milk
- ⇒ Re-start her oestrus cycle
- ⇒ Increase body condition score, if necessary
- ⇒ Grow if she is not yet at mature weight
- ⇒ Maintain herself



Body condition and nutrition after calving are key determinants of fertility and how quickly a cow will get back in calf. Every effort should be made to minimise, and if possible avoid, body condition loss between cows calving and getting back in calf. To achieve this the best grazing should be prioritised for the breeding herd, and in particular, for younger and thinner cows. If cows are kept housed for a few weeks after calving then good quality silage should be offered, with some concentrates provided to any thin cows or first/second calvers.

Research has shown that cows calving in moderate body condition start cycling one to two weeks earlier after calving than thin cows. For cows that calve in a less than ideal body condition (lower than 2.5), fertility can be improved by providing high levels of nutrition immediately after calving.

The nutrient demands of early lactation can almost double the energy requirements of a suckler cow compared to when she is dry. Milk yield peaks at around six to eight weeks after calving which coincides with the breeding season, so access to good quality grazing needs to be planned for cows and heifers being put to the bull. A plentiful supply of high quality grass is particularly important for heifers with their first calf at foot to ensure they get back in calf and keep growing.

Good grazing is key to keeping the costs of production down, grass is the cheapest feed available if utilised well. In terms of grass growth, producers should aim for sward heights of eight to ten centimetres in continuously stocked fields and be prepared to move cattle to new grazing if quality or quantity starts to decline.

Table 1: Nutrient guidelines for a mature 650kg suckler cow

	Dry Matter Intake (kg/day)	Energy (ME MJ/day)	Crude Protein (CP % in dry matter)	Rapeseed meal (kg)
Early lactation	12-14	120-130	11-12	-
Late lactation	9-11	85-95	11	1.5
Dry	10	75-80	9	0.5

The table provides a general guide only. Exact diet specification required will depend on factors such as cow condition, weight loss allowed, date of turn-out in relation to bulling etc.

A compact calving period will optimise the use of spring grass and make managing the herd easier. This is because the cows are at a similar stage of their production cycle and calves can be managed as bigger, more uniform batches. In herds where the calving period is longer than desired, now is the time to take positive steps to shorten it.

Putting the bull in early with cows in poor condition will have limited effect on tightening the calving pattern. Instead, it is better to gain control of the feeding, make sure the bull is taken out of breeding groups on a planned date and consider selling later calving cows with calves at foot or keeping them in a separate group to be sold at weaning. Similarly, scanning cows a few weeks after the bull is removed will identify empty cows, providing the opportunity to separate them from the main herd before being sold. Changes in the diet around mating can result in early embryonic loss, therefore it is advisable to avoid any changes six weeks before and after the service period.

More information regarding the nutritional requirements of the suckler cow can be found in the Better Returns Programme manual, [Feeding Suckler Cows and Calves for Better Returns](#)