

FACTS ABOUT OUR FOOD ~ DAIRY COWS~

Dairy cows are kept pregnant to keep milk production high, only to have their calves taken away as young as one or two days old.

❑ OVERVIEW

Modern dairy cows have been manipulated and exploited to produce more milk than they would if left on their own. They can suffer physically and emotionally as a result. Cows are typically good-natured, sensitive creatures, but on an intensive dairy farm, cows can become nervous and high-strung, making them difficult to manage.

❑ LIFE SENTENCE ON THE FACTORY FARM

Modern cows can produce on average 9519 kilograms of milk a year. The market for dairy products, including milk, cheese, ice cream and butter, has grown dramatically in recent times. While the number of Canadian dairy farms has decreased by 85% from 1970 to 2003, the volume of milk per farm has increased by an astounding 550% in that same period. Dairy cows have paid the price for such staggering growth. In 2003, there were **1.06 million cows** on dairy farms in Canada, and they produced **7.5 billion litres** of milk. The number of cows decreases each year, while the amount of milk produced remains the same.

➤ HOUSING

There are two housing systems used for dairy cows in Canada – tie stall and free-stalls, with tie-stalls being more common.

In tie stalls, cows are tied into individual pens in which they are fed and milked by portable milking machines. They are unable to interact socially with other cows, groom or move freely. Even the simple act of lying down can be problematic.



*Dairy cow in the milking parlour
Photo courtesy Farm Sanctuary*

Free stalls are individual, bedded stalls with earth or concrete floors.

Although cows can move between stalls, feeding and watering areas, unfortunately they are not “free” as the name suggests. If they are let outside, often it is into a tiny paddock. There can be many cows living in a small space, which can lead to frustration and bullying of subordinate cows. Concrete floors, which are easier for producers to keep clean, can lead to foot and leg injuries.

➤ THE MILK MACHINE

Dairy cows are typically inseminated at 15 months. Their gestation periods are nine months, like humans. Cows are inseminated once a year for the three to four years they are used in milk production before being slaughtered. Dairy cows who are not in confinement live about 25 years old. In addition to being pregnant most of their short lives, cows must provide milk for seven months of their pregnancy. This puts an enormous strain on the cows physically and emotionally.

➤ HER OFFSPRING

The majority of female calves are used to replace older dairy cows when they are ‘retired’ from milk production. Male calves are shipped off to be raised for veal. The veal industry exists only because of the demand for milk - it is the industry’s solution to the male calves born to dairy cows.

Calves typically suckle for the first few months of their lives, but because dairy producers want the cow’s milk for human consumption, calves are separated from their mothers when they are only a day or two old. The separation of calf from mother can cause terrible stress and anxiety for both.

Female calves are given a milk replacement diet for about eight weeks, then are weaned from the milk diet and fed solid food. During the time they are fed only milk, their weight can double. Calves are often housed in single pens where they cannot interact socially with other calves, exercise, or move freely.

➤ PHYSICAL AILMENTS

Intensive milking and confinement of dairy cows can result in many physical ailments. **Swollen udders** are a common and serious problem. This is a result of constant milking which puts strain on the udder. Mastitis is a common bacterial infection of the udder.

Dairy cows are fed high-energy feed to increase their milk production. However, this type of diet can result in metabolic disorders that can cause lameness and even death.

Many producers in the U.S. inject their cows with a hormone called **Bovine Growth Hormone**, a drug that increases milk production. BGH has been linked to human breast cancer and gastronomic disorders. It has also been shown to increase the risk of udder infections in dairy cows, leading to increased antibiotic use. BGH was banned from use in Canada in 1998, but it is still being used, according to some reports.

❑ OTHER DAIRY COW ISSUES

➤ TRANSPORT

Following a life of milk production, depleted dairy cows may be transported across Canada to slaughter. These weak, calcium-depleted cows may legally be subjected to journeys of 52 hours without water, food or rest, according to regulations under the Health of Animals Act.

➤ DOWNERS

"**Downer**" cattle are unable to walk or stand, and arrive at the slaughterhouse unable to leave the transport truck, usually due to injury or illness sustained on the dairy farm. Downed animals are sometimes **dragged** from the truck by tractors or loaders, and are either left to die, or are slaughtered with the other animals. This results in immense suffering and pain for a downed animal, and is unacceptable. In 2001, more than 6600 downed dairy cows arrived at federal slaughterhouses in Canada.

These sick or injured animals should not be transported in the first place, but instead humanely killed on the farm. Those that become incapacitated during transport should be humanely killed on the truck, then unloaded.

It was a downer cow that tested positive for BSE in Canada in 2003.

➤ TAIL DOCKING

Some dairy farmers cut the tails of their cows because they believe it reduces illnesses like mastitis. The tail is docked with an elastrator, which cuts the blood supply to the tail, eventually causing it to fall off. Experts believe this procedure is painful. Extensive studies have been undertaken on tail docking in Canada, and studies have found tail docking does not decrease the risk of mastitis or udder infections. In fact, it can actually decrease cleanliness because the cow is unable to swat flies with her tail.

❑ ALTERNATIVES

Dairy cows do not have to be intensively reared. Dairy cows should be housed in environments where they have ample space, opportunity for social interaction, and access to the outdoors. They should be given personal attention from producers, and not treated like milk production units.

❑ WHAT YOU CAN DO

The **Canadian Coalition for Farm Animals** is working to end the suffering caused by intensive dairy farming. You can make a difference.

- Don't buy dairy products with ingredients from intensively farmed dairy cows. Choose dairy products that are *Certified Organic*.
- Eliminate, or reduce the amount of dairy products you consume and replace them with other protein-rich foods, such as tofu and beans. Also try calcium-fortified beverages and calcium-rich foods like greens.
- Ask your local grocery store to stock alternatives to factory-farmed meat, eggs and dairy, and to ensure that these alternatives are clearly labelled (contact information, guidelines and suggestions on our website).



*Organic Dairy Cows
Photo Courtesy of Elisa Clancy*

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