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A Dairy Cow's Career

Dairy cattle are used to produce the milk we drink and the milk products we eat. In a herd of dairy cattle there will be adult females (cows) with their babies (calves). A male calf is called a bull calf. A female calf is called a heifer. After the heifer has her first calf at the age of two, she is called a cow. This is when her career as a milk producer begins.



It takes nine months for a pregnant cow to deliver a calf. That's the same amount of time it takes human babies to be born! Normally cows will have one calf, but they can have twins. Calves usually weigh between 30 and 100 pounds.

After a calf is born, the mother cow starts producing milk. Cows are mammals and like other mammals they produce milk for their young. All mammal mothers make milk. Dairy cows will have one calf every year.

Dairy cows produce much more milk than their calves need. After the calves are born, they are moved to protective hutches where workers bottle feed them twice a day. When the heifers are three months old, they get to live in a large lot. There they eat hay, silage and grain. Sometimes they can graze (eat grass) in a pasture. Young heifers grow quickly. They can gain as much as 1.8 pounds a day.

The cows will be milked for ten months then get two months off. Normally a cow will stay part of the dairy herd until it is six or seven years old.

Dairy cows are not pets. They are working animals. Two or three times every day they are moved into the milking parlor where they are milked by machines. Milking takes five to seven minutes and is very comfortable for the cow.

Cows spend a lot of time each day resting and chewing. They spend six to seven hours a day eating and another eight hours chewing their cud. Chewing plays a very important role in a cow's digestive system. Humans chew and swallow their food once. Cows chew and swallow their food twice. The first time is after they eat. The second time is after they cough up some food called cud from their stomach.

A cow's body uses part of the feed it eats to grow and stay healthy. The other part is used to make milk. The milk is stored in the udder and released through the teats when the cow is milked. It only takes the cow's body about two days to process her food into milk.