

TRANSITION HEIFER FEEDING MANAGEMENT CHECKLIST

1. Does the transition heifer ration contain at least 18 percent crude protein?

The growing heifer needs lots of good quality protein for muscle and immune system development. Usually the rate of post-weaning feed intake can be encouraged by continuing the same grain mix as was fed in the pre-weaning housing. In winter with weather consistently below freezing, a 180 pound (82 kg) heifer needs 7 pounds (3.2 kg) of grain mix daily to have enough protein for maintenance and growth in excess of 1.5 pounds (0.7 kg) a day.

2. Does the transition heifer ration contain mostly grain and limited amounts of roughage for the first week after weaning?

Most just weaned calves have been living on grain and water (and in some cases a limited amount of milk). Before they can digest and use the nutrients in roughages like a cow, they need to grow a large number of fiber-digesting microbes in their rumens.

This growth period is about 10 to 14 days. During this time they continue to live on protein and energy from grain. By eating a limited amount of roughage in addition to grain they encourage the multiplication of ruminal fiber-digesting microbes without decreasing grain intake.

3. Does the transition heifer ration have enough energy per pound for both maintenance and to meet the farm's growth goals?

The relative size of a transition calf's rumen to her body size is still small compared to an adult cow. By feeding an energy dense ration to these small growing heifers, we compensate for this relatively small rumen.

That's why grazing heifers consuming high protein grass do so much better when a high-energy grain mix supplements the grass. That's why confined transition heifers consuming free choice high protein hay do so much better when supplemented by a high-energy grain mix.

4. Does the feeding program focus on feeding the rumen microbes rather than the heifer?

As transition heifers grow older changes in their ration are almost the rule rather than the exception. Often these changes involve introducing a new roughage source.

For example, changing from dry hay to haylage. Or, changing from haylage to a mix of corn silage and haylage. Or, changing from grazing grass to stored feeds in the fall. The microbial mix that most efficiently digests each of these roughages varies from one to another.

Introduce small amounts of a roughage that is going to be in the next ration a week or two before the change takes place. That is, begin establishing the new microbial population before the transition age heifers have to depend heavily on the new roughage as their sole source of nutrition.

RATE YOURSELF
YES NO

- 1. The transition heifer ration contains 18 percent crude protein.** _____
- 2. Transition heifers are fed only free choice starter grain for the first week after moving into group housing.** _____
- 3. Transition heifers are fed free choice grain and limited hay the first two weeks after moving into group housing.** _____
- 4. Transition heifers are fed a ration with an energy density of at least 1.3 megacalories per pound of dry matter until they are about four months old** _____
- 5. Changes in roughages are preceded by feeding limited amounts of the new roughage for a week or two prior to the overall change.** _____

Reference: National Research Council, Nutrient Requirement of Dairy Cattle, 2001. Chapter 10 "Nutrient Requirements of the Young Calf" Table 10 "Daily Energy and Protein Requirements of Weaned (Ruminant) Calves."

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