



NURTURING PRE-CALVING HEIFERS

**By Bianca Theeruth,
Cargill calf and heifer specialist**

Giving your heifers a little extra 'TLC' in the run up to calving will pay dividends. Nutrition is key as it will affect calving, colostrum production and calf health, as well as the heifer's recovery and subsequent lactation performance. Improvements here will lead to better feed efficiency and lifetime productivity.

During the final three months of pregnancy the unborn calf makes up nearly two-thirds of its growth. Heifers should be condition scored throughout the rearing period and any loss of condition should be abated.

Four weeks before calving, hormonal and lactation changes, and the lack of space due to the size of the foetus, may suppress appetite. It's at this stage though that she should be prepared 'nutritionally' for her first lactation and the rumen conditioned to a higher energy diet to avoid metabolic disorders. A dry cow ration should be introduced with protein and energy levels that meet her requirements.

Target crude protein should be about 15.5 % and energy requirement is 110 MJ per day. While it may be tempting to increase this to help heifers to avoid a negative energy balance at calving, a high protein diet can increase the negative energy balance and lead to metabolic problems. Balance is key.

And, importantly, make sure a high quality vitamin and mineral package is included. This has a vital role in supporting the immune function and colostrum quality so it must be balanced and in sufficient quantity.

Timing of vaccinations pre calving is crucial to make sure peak antibody levels are available and passed to the new born calf via colostrum.

Here are the targets for the four weeks pre calving:

- o Rumen adaption to post-partum diet
- o Normal blood calcium levels maintained to avoid milk fever. A calcium supplementation is required on DCAD diets to levels of between 0.5 and 0.75% in order for the heifer to calve with the optimum calcium status.
- o Balanced diet to maintain positive energy balance to avoid metabolic problems post calving including ketosis
- o Balanced vitamin and mineral package to promote quality colostrum and boost the immune system
- o Vaccination programme accurately timed to provide passive protection to the new born calf

**Contact Bianca Theeruth on:
01845 578125**

Bianca_theeruth@cargill.com