

The transition period- typically the three weeks before calving through to three weeks after calving- is one of the most demanding stages of a cow's production cycle. The dry period is not simply time "off" - it's a critical period of recovery, regeneration and preparation for her next lactation. ***Get the transition period right and you prime the cow for a healthier, more productive and more profitable lactation.***

During this time feed intake, metabolism, immunity and mineral requirements change rapidly as the cow prepares for calving and milk production.

A smooth transition supports:

- Good appetite
- Milk production
- Better fertility
- Reduced disease risk

Body Condition: Start Before Calving

One of the most useful measures of transition success is body condition score (BCS).

Rather than focusing only on whether cows are the correct condition at calving, it's important to look at how much condition they gain or lose throughout the transition period.

Ideally, cows should:

- Enter the dry period at an appropriate BCS (around 2.5 to 3)
- Maintain condition through the dry period
- Avoid excessive condition loss after calving

Over-conditioned cows are more likely to experience reduced feed intake around calving and excessive body condition loss after calving. This further increases the risk of ketosis, fatty liver disease and displaced abomasum. The goal is not necessarily to achieve a target BCS at calving, but to avoid significant changes in condition before and after calving.

Keep Them Eating

Dry matter intake (DMI) naturally falls before calving, just as the cow's energy requirements are about to increase dramatically. Maintaining feed intake is therefore one of the key goals of transition management.

Look at the cow, not just the ration

A good transition cow should have: ***Good appetite → Good rumen fill → Healthy fresh cow***

Monitor:

- Rumen fill
- Appetite
- Cud chewing
- Faecal consistency
- Milk yield after calving

A well-formulated ration is important, but even the best ration is of little value if cows cannot comfortably access it.

What reduces feed intake?

- Overcrowding
- Poor feed access
- Competition at the feed barrier
- Social stress
- Heat stress
- Poor cow comfort
- Poor feed palatability

Effective transition cow management focuses on maintaining dry matter intake, minimising stress, ensuring adequate feeding and resting space and identifying health issues early. Cows should have a minimum of 75cm of feed space per head, together with sufficient lying and loafing areas. A bedded lying area of 1.25 m² per 1,000 litres of milk production per cow should be provided, along with at least 2 m² of loafing area per cow.

What good looks like?

Monitor trends across the herd rather than focusing solely on individual cows.

Typical targets may include:

- Milk fever <2-5%
- RFM <4-8%
- LDA <1-3%

Targets vary between herds and your vet can help determine what is appropriate for your system.

Common Transition Cow Diseases

- Milk fever (hypocalcaemia)
- Ketosis
- Displaced abomasum (LDA/RDA)
- Retained foetal membranes (RFM)
- Metritis
- Mastitis

Watch for reduced appetite, reduced milk yield, dullness, fever or difficulty standing. Early veterinary intervention improve outcomes.

Fertility Starts During Transition

The effects of transition management extend well beyond calving. Poor feed intake, excessive body condition loss and transition disease can all negatively impact fertility later in lactation. Therefore, good transition management is an investment in future reproductive performance.

Can We Measure More?

If there are concerns about transition performance, targeted monitoring can help identify underlying issues.

Useful assessments include:

- **NEFAs (7-14 days pre-calving):** fat mobilisation and negative energy balance
- **BHB (3-14 days post calving):** ketosis and subclinical ketosis monitoring
- **Calcium (within 24 hours of calving):** assessment of hypocalcaemia risk
- **Magnesium and phosphorus:** investigation of mineral status
- **Body condition scoring and rumen fill scoring:** simple, practical monitoring tools. Our brilliant vet techs offer herd BCS assessments to help identify opportunities for improvement
- **Don't forget the calf: Colostrum quality testing and calf total proteins** can help assess successful passive transfer of immunity and provide valuable feedback on transition cow and calving management.

Working With Your Vet

Monitoring helps identify underlying transition cow issues and guide practical solutions such as calcium supplementation, propylene glycol, liver-support products, dietary adjustments and enhanced fresh cow monitoring.

If you have concerns about transition cow performance, speak to your vet. Transition monitoring and blood sampling can help identify herd-level problems and target interventions effectively.



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