

Section 2

Choosing and Sourcing your Calves



Introduction

The profitability of the dairy beef enterprise depends largely on the quality of calf that is purchased. Poor calves lead to poor feed efficiencies, weight gains and thrive, and potentially high mortalities. High mortality within the first four weeks of arrival on the new farm is significantly associated with both the calf supplier and the calf bodyweight on arrival. Purchasing from reliable suppliers and ensuring to purchase calves that are good weight for age is crucial to limiting calf mortality.

- ① Why is calf arrival weight important?
- ② What is the impact of calf source or supplier?
- ③ What information should a producer look for when purchasing calves?
- ④ How important is the 'sire effect' when choosing a calf?
- ⑤ What visual calf characteristics should you look for when selecting calves?
- ⑥ What age should calves be when transported from the farm of origin?

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① Why is calf arrival weight important?

For the first three weeks on the new farm, lower weight calves have a higher risk of dying. 'Weight for age', i.e. liveweight divided by age in days, has a significant positive correlation to both lifetime daily live weight gain and carcass weight.

Table 1. Minimum target weight for Holstein and early maturing crossbred calves.

	AA/ Hereford	Holstein	
Age (weeks)	Target Liveweight (kg)	Target Liveweight (kg)	Liveweight gain (kg/ day)
1	45	48	
6	70	73	0.7
12	100	102	0.7
15	117	119	0.8

② What is the impact of calf source or supplier?

The source of the calves greatly influences the disease risks on the rearing farm. Some sources provide calves at higher risk of disease than others. This will depend on:

- I. Health and feeding management on the farm of origin, especially the provision of adequate high quality colostrum shortly after birth.
- II. Distance and mode of transport to the rearing farm.
- III. Whether the calves were purchased directly from the farm or through an agent.
- IV. The amount/level of mixing of stock from different farms.

Calves purchased directly from a dairy farm are often healthier than those purchased through marts. They will have had reduced exposure to pathogens, less co-mingling, they are delivered directly and often they will have had better nutrition.

Preferably buy calves from farms which have control programmes in place against diseases such as calf scours, BVD, and IBR.

The table below outlines the different options:

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Mart	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convenient. • You are paying market value for calves. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unknown disease status. • Calves have to be transported to and from the mart.
Agent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convenient. • No need to go to mart yourself. • Can set criteria regarding cost of calf/type of calf. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unknown disease status. • Calves may spend considerable time in transit. • Need a good relationship with agent.
Direct from farm	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can attain disease status including feeding of colostrum. • Can plan for when calves are coming onto your farm. • No need for you, or calves, to travel to and from the mart. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Requires planning and having agreement in place with dairy farmer.

③ What information should a producer look for when purchasing calves?

The producer should seek as much information as possible on the health status of the origin herd. Such information should include:

- I. Vaccination policy.
- II. Sire identity.
- III. Genetic merit of the calf.
- IV. Previous and current disease problems, i.e. coccidiosis, cryptosporidiosis, Johne's Disease.

Often it is easier to obtain such information when purchasing directly from the farm of birth. In addition, it may be beneficial to visit the farm of birth as this can be a good indicator of the potential health and quality of the calf. When purchasing from agents, specify what information you would like to know about the dairy herd if unsure of the reliability of their calf sources.



Preferably, calves should be purchased in batches of the same age from one source. Purchasing from the same supplier each year can reduce the likelihood of disease problems and poor quality calves.

4 How important is the 'sire effect' when choosing a calf?

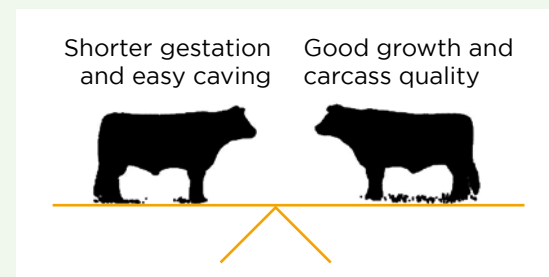
There is evidence that the sire has a huge impact on the performance of the calf, and subsequently on the profitability of the dairy beef enterprise. Calves should be chosen based on their genetic merit and sire rather than just their appearance as a two to three week old animal.

The results from the ABP/Teagasc dairy beef programme show that choosing between calves sired by two different Angus bulls that are both easy calving and short gestation, with one being poorer for terminal traits, can potentially lead to a difference of up to €6,000 in profit for a farmer slaughtering 50 animals.

KEY POINT:



Good breeding decisions in the dairy herd are based on balancing the need for calving ease with good beef qualities. Calf rearers should look for calves from dairy herds whose bull was chosen for both easy calving and calf conformation and growth rates.



5 What visual calf characteristics should you look for when selecting calves?

Not all calves are viable to rear for beef. A trained eye in the factors and qualities to look for in a calf can greatly improve the productivity of your dairy beef enterprise.

In general terms, calves must be in good health, have good conformation for beef, and be a good size. Weight for age is a prime indicator of future growth potential.

Purchased calves should be inspected thoroughly. Try to choose non-induced calves and avoid calves that are twins.

KEY TIPS:



Failure of passive transfer must be assumed for all calves arriving onto the farm. A blood test to measure blood immunoglobulin levels can be carried out in the first seven days of life to check for adequate colostrum intake.

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HOW TO:



Choose the ideal calf

1. Should be at least seven days of age, 10 days if travelling >100km.

2. Calves must have received sufficient colostrum.

3. Hooves firm and worn flat, not bulbous or round with soft unworn tissue.

4. Dry, wrinkled, withered and shrivelled umbilical cords, not pink/red, raw or fleshy.



5. Alert with a clean damp nose and bright eyes.

6. Supple skin and shiny coat.

7. No visible signs of disease, diarrhoea, discharge (mouth/nose/eyes), deformity, disability, injury or blindness.

8. Calves must not be lame and must be able to bear weight on all four limbs.

6 What age should calves be when transported from the farm of origin?

The age that a calf should be before it is transferred is determined by the distance it is being transported. If the distance is greater than 100km, calves must be at least **10 days of age**. If being transported less than 100km calves should be at least **seven days of age**.

KEY TIPS:



In all cases it is preferable not to transport calves until they are three weeks of age. This will reduce the high risk of scours and stress which are commonly seen in calves that are transported at less than three weeks of age.