



## FACTS ABOUT OUR FOOD

### ~ DAIRY COWS ~

*Dairy cows are kept pregnant to keep milk production high, only to have their calves taken away as young as one or two days old.*

#### **OVERVIEW**

Modern dairy cows have been manipulated and exploited to produce more milk than they would if left on their own. They suffer physically and psychologically as a result. Cows are typically good-natured, sensitive creatures, but on an intensive dairy farm, cows can become nervous and high-strung, making them difficult to manage which can result in rough handling.

#### **LIFE ON THE FACTORY FARM**

Modern cows can produce on average 8642 kilograms of milk a year. The market for dairy products, including milk, yogurt, cheese, ice cream and butter, has grown dramatically in recent times. Because cows have been bred for high milk yield, over the past 30 years, the number of dairy farms has decreased significantly and dairy herds have declined by half, yet total milk production has continued to rise.

Dairy cows have paid the price for such staggering growth. As of 2009, there were **1.4 million cows** on dairy farms in Canada, and they produced **almost eight billion litres** of milk. The number of cows decreases each year, while the amount of milk produced remains the same.

#### **HOUSING**

There are two main housing systems used for dairy cows in Canada – tie stall and free-stalls, with tie-stalls being more common.

In tie stalls, cows are tethered at the neck and tied to stalls. They do not leave the stalls, and they are fed and milked by portable milking machines. They are unable to interact socially with other cows, groom or move freely. Even the simple act of lying down can be problematic.

Free stalls are individual stalls with earth or concrete floors. Although cows can move between stalls, feeding and watering areas, unfortunately they are not “free” as the name suggests. If they are let outside, often it is into a tiny paddock. There can be many cows living in a small space, which can lead to frustration and bullying of subordinate cows. Subordinate cows may also be displaced at the feed bunk and forced to stand more often as many free stall systems have fewer stalls than cows.

Cows are sometimes housed on concrete floors, which cause cows to develop foot and leg injuries.

#### **THE MILK MACHINE**

Dairy cows are typically artificially inseminated at 15 months. Their gestation periods are nine months, like humans. Cows are inseminated once a year for the two to three years they are used in milk production before being slaughtered. In addition to being pregnant most of their short lives, cows must provide milk for seven months of their pregnancy. This puts an enormous strain on the cows physically and emotionally.



*Dairy cow in the milking parlour  
Photo courtesy Farm Sanctuary*

A dairy cow's average lifespan is about five years, compared to her natural lifespan which is about 25 years. Dairy cows are constantly replaced by younger animals.

### **HER OFFSPRING**

Calves would normally suckle for the first few months of their lives, but because dairy producers want the cow's milk for human consumption, calves are usually separated from their mothers within 24 hours after birth. The separation of calf from mother can cause immense stress and anxiety for both.

Male calves are shipped off to be raised for veal. The veal industry exists only because of the demand for milk – it is the industry's solution to the male calves born to dairy cows.

Female calves, to be used as replacement dairy cows, are fed a milk replacement diet twice daily. They are typically limit-fed (about 10% of their body weight) via bucket, not teat. The inability to suckle combined with hunger exacerbates their distress. At about eight weeks, they are weaned from the milk diet and fed solid food. Calves are often housed in single pens where they cannot interact socially with other calves, exercise, or move freely.

### **PHYSICAL AILMENTS**

Intensive milking and confinement of dairy cows can result in many physical ailments. **Swollen udders** are a common and serious problem. This is a result of constant milking which puts strain on the udder. **Mastitis** is a common painful bacterial infection of the udder. Lameness from hoof injury and disease is also common.

Dairy cows are fed high-energy feed to increase their milk production. However, this type of diet can result in metabolic disorders that can also cause lameness and even death.

Many producers in the U.S. inject their cows with a hormone called **Bovine Growth Hormone (BGH)**, a drug that increases milk production. BGH has been linked to human breast cancer and gastronomic disorders. It has also been shown to increase the risk of udder infections in dairy cows, leading to increased antibiotic use. BGH was banned from use in Canada in 1998, but it is still being used, according to some reports.

### **TRANSPORT**

Following a life of milk production, depleted dairy cows may be transported across Canada to slaughter. These weak, calcium-depleted cows may legally be subjected to journeys of 52 hours without water, food or rest, according to regulations under the *Health of Animals Act*.

### **DOWNERS**

Although the transport of "downer" animals was banned by the CFIA in 2005, this egregious cruelty continues, contrary to *Health of Animals Regulations*. Downer cattle are unable to walk or stand, and arrive at the slaughterhouse unable to leave the transport truck, usually due to injury or illness sustained on the dairy farm. Because profit, not animal welfare, is the bottom line, some farmers attempt to salvage the meat from these cows in extremely poor condition. Dairy cows are turned into ground beef or pet food. Lean ground beef, ironically, comes from dairy cows that are too thin or emaciated.

Downer animals should not be transported in the first place, but instead humanely killed on the farm. Those that become incapacitated during transport should be humanely killed on the truck, then unloaded.

It was a downer cow that tested positive for Canada's first cow with Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE), also known as "mad cow disease", in 2003.

### **TAIL DOCKING**

Some dairy farmers cut the tails of their cows because they believe it reduces illnesses like mastitis. The tail is docked with an elastrator, which cuts the blood supply to the tail, eventually causing it to fall off. Experts believe this procedure to be very painful. Extensive studies have been undertaken on tail docking in Canada and have found tail docking does not decrease the risk of mastitis or udder infections. In fact, it can actually decrease cleanliness because the cow is unable to swat flies with her tail.

The voluntary Dairy Code of Practice, revised in 2009, states cows' tails should "not be docked unless medically necessary."

## ALTERNATIVES

Dairy cows do not have to be intensively reared. They should be housed in environments where they have ample space, opportunity for social interaction, and access to the outdoors. They should be given personal attention from producers, and not treated like milk production units.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO

The **Canadian Coalition for Farm Animals** is working to end the suffering caused by intensive dairy farming. You can make a difference.

- Eliminate, or reduce the amount of dairy products you consume and replace with alternatives such as other protein-rich and calcium-fortified beverages such as soy milk or almond milk, and calcium-rich foods like greens. Also try soy-based cream cheeses or ice cream.
- If you purchase dairy products, don't buy dairy products with ingredients from intensively farmed dairy cows. Instead, choose dairy products that are *Certified Organic*.



### **For more information, please contact us**

Email: [info@humanefood.ca](mailto:info@humanefood.ca); Website: [www.humanefood.ca](http://www.humanefood.ca)  
Mail: 131 Bloor Street West, Suite 200/140, Toronto, ON M5S 1R8