

# Do not neglect heifer nutrition in the summer months

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Since dairy heifer weight at bulling and calving is critical to lifetime performance, growth and nutrition should be a high priority. It is something more easily achieved during the winter when housed, but a carefully planned approach to summer feeding is also vital if replacement heifers are to enter the herd successfully.

Given the need to get heifers into the herd and milking at 22-24 months to minimise costs and maximise production, anything which slows growth is bad news.

For example, heifer nutrition really should not be dictated by the changing feed value of grass or the weather.

## Buffer feeding

Buffer feeding is the only way to avoid the unwanted fluctuations in growth, and it is important to monitor heifers regularly to ensure they are growing evenly.

The problem is that heifers often graze distant land not suitable for the milking herd, cut off by roads, or steep, poor quality ground, so there is a danger of them being out of sight, out of mind.

The typical approach to summer heifer rearing is to visually check animals maybe every other day, and perhaps feed younger heifers a few rearing nuts.

Yet achieving the correct growth rates for specific periods throughout those first two years is absolutely

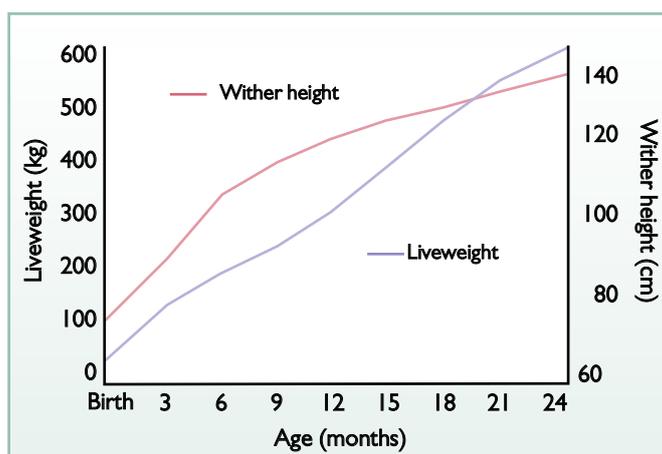


Fig. 1. Liveweight and wither height for Holstein/Friesian heifers.

crucial to future milk production, especially during the period when heifers are 4-10 months old as this is when irreversible damage can be done.

Target weights at bulling and calving are shown in Table 1, and the aim should be to produce well grown heifers that are ready to calve down at 85-90% of mature cow weight.

The only way to achieve this consistently is to ensure calves are always growing at the rates shown in the table, with estimated wither height a good indicator of liveweight (Fig. 1) if no weighing facilities are available.

It is possible for good quality grass grazed to provide the nutrients needed to grow a heifer fast enough to hit 390kg at bulling, but only under ideal conditions.

Problems arise when grass growth or feed-value start to drop off, particularly as the summer progresses,

or during bad weather, which limits grazing time and increases energy demands.

The danger is that during July, August and September, it is grass quality and grazing availability which dictate growth rates, rather than a planned approach to nutrition.

So, dairy producers must be prepared to supplement the grass as and when needed, to compensate for any variation in supply and quality.

## Avoid conventional feeds

Conventional feeds, such as straight cereals or low protein concentrate pellets, should be avoided, since they can result in an oversupply of energy in comparison to the protein needs of the growing heifer, especially during that very sensitive 4-10 month period.

Where suitable, the moist bulk

feeds such as brewers' grains, Traffordgold and Vitagold (moist co-products derived from processing cereals in the human food sector) are a good option, as they contain a higher ratio of protein to energy.

Alternatively, a specialist heifer rearing blend may be more convenient if the heifers are kept away from the main farm, yet still very cost effective.

## Most feeds easy to use

Moist feeds make an excellent summer buffer feed for heifers, and can be simply fed using troughs or ring feeders in the field.

It makes them extremely easy to use whenever grass growth slows or conditions are poor, and does not require anything more complicated than a tractor and loader.

Table 2 shows suggested feeding quantities for the key moist feed alternatives to maintain growth rates during a typical summer, but do not forget to also ensure an adequate supply of vitamins and minerals, whether as mineral licks, boluses (trace elements only) or mixed with the feed.

The table includes a recommended increase if drought conditions take hold and grass stops growing altogether.

In essence, it is important to make feeding and monitoring part of the daily routine, and bring heifers in to be weighed every couple of months.

It is an ideal time to give every single animal a thorough check-up, and treatment with fly repellents, drenches or boluses can easily be carried out with minimal stress for both the animals and staff. ■

Table 1. Target growth rates and weights for Holstein heifers.

	Target growth rate (kg/d)	Target liveweight (kg)
Birth to five weeks	0.55-0.70	65
Five weeks to 4 months	0.80-0.85	145
4-10 months	0.70-0.75	265
10-12 months	0.85	320
12-15 months	0.85	390
15-22 months	0.85	575
22 months to calving	0.65	610

Table 2. Suggested buffer feeding regimes for dairy heifers.

	Suggested daily intake at different ages (kg/day)			Increase for drought conditions (%)
	3-6 months	6-15 months	15-24 months	
Brewers' grains	2-5	3-7	5-10	+50
Traffordgold	1-3	2-4	3-5	+50
Vitagold	1-3	2-5	3-6	+50