

What do farmers do to make sure their animals stay healthy?

Keeping animals healthy is extremely important to dairy farmers. The care starts on day one, as immediately after birth, calves are fed colostrum (their mother's first milk) which is full of nutrients and antibodies. Calves are naturally born with no immune response, so the colostrum is vital to provide the needed antibodies to start immune development. Calves are then provided with warm milk or milk replacer (like formula), water, and then grain and hay. As calves continue to grow, they are vaccinated to help prevent diseases that can be a challenge to calves. A good amount of dry, clean bedding is also critical to help keep calves healthy and comfortable.

Farmers also vaccinate adult dairy cows and they monitor several things to ensure cows are staying in good health, including how much the cows are eating, how much milk they produce, if they lose too much weight, if they are lethargic, or have an visible injury. In addition to the farmer keeping an eye on the herd, a veterinarian usually comes once a week or month to do a herd health check. This involves checking the cows that have been bred to confirm they are pregnant, as well as observing and treating any animals in need of medical attention. Similar to when you or I go to the doctor, if necessary, the veterinarian may recommend the use of pain medication or antibiotics to treat the illness. In all cases, if a lactating cow is given antibiotics, the milk she produces will be kept separate from the main tank for a designated period, and it will never enter our food chain.

Cows are also given pedicures. Once or twice a year, a hoof trimmer or the farmer will take a look at each cow's hooves and trim them to maintain the proper length and structure to keep the hoof and leg strong and healthy. Providing dairy cows with a good place to rest is also crucial for hoof health. Cows may be outside on pasture or, if they are in the barn, farmers provide a large resting area called a bedded-pack, or individual stalls that are bedded with clean and dry bedding like sand or sawdust.

It's also very important to provide adequate barn ventilation to prevent respiratory diseases in calves and cows. Fans help bring fresh air into the barns, and the use of more fans and misters in the summer help keep cows cool. Technology is available that allows farmers to set the curtains on the sidewalls of the barn to open and close at a certain temperature and humidity to keep the environment inside the barn ideal. Overall, dairy farmers work hard to care for their animals and they take great pride in knowing their cows are healthy.

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