

## Spring calving cows

Things to think about now include:

- **cow body condition (BCS)**
- **feeding from now to calving**
- **vaccinating against calf scour**
- **supplementing with selenium**

**Condition score and feeding are the most important** of these. Getting these right requires attention to detail and constant re-evaluation. But getting them wrong has major implications for herd productivity, so it really is worth the effort.

**Cows that are either too thin or too fat are more likely to have calving difficulties** than cows that are at the correct condition score. And difficult calvings reduce the chance of the cow or heifer getting back in calf. **Cows that are too thin or too fat also take longer to start cycling and conceive again**, irrespective of whether they have calved easily or not.

This table shows the effect of poor body condition score at calving on the time taken for cows to come back on heat.

Body condition score at calving	>2.5	2	<1.5
Percentage in heat by 60 days after calving	91	61	46

**Cows that are too thin at calving will also produce poorer quality colostrum**, so there is an increased risk of calf diseases, such as scour and pneumonia. Where cows are vaccinated against rotavirus pre-calving, the success of the vaccine relies on the cow or heifer producing high levels of antibodies in the colostrum. Thin cows will produce fewer antibodies, so the vaccine will be less effective.

**The ideal body condition score at calving is 2.5 to 3.**



These in-calvers are at the ideal body condition score of 2.5 to 3. The bones of the pelvis are clearly visible but are rounded. It's important to look at cows from behind as well as from the side. Cows in late pregnancy with a full rumen can appear fitter than they really are. The general shape should be rounded not angular and there should only be a shallow depression either side of the tail-head.



These 2 cows have both recently calved. The one on the left is at condition score 2, so is slightly too lean. The one on the right is in ideal body condition for calving.

Now is the time to act to make sure your cows are in the correct body condition at calving. Thin cows (and anything thinner than the photos above is too thin) should be segregated and fed to gain condition up until about 2 months pre-calving. Over fat cows can be fed to gradually lose condition between now and calving. **We can advise you on formulating rations for suckler cows** – but if you are feeding silage, we will need to have a nutritional analysis of the silage.

**In-calf heifers are always best grouped and fed separately.**

Remember that **cows might be thin due to disease, such as liver fluke or Johnes disease**. As liver fluke are mostly picked up in the autumn, now **is a good time to screen for liver fluke by testing faeces samples**. Collect samples from a number of individual fresh pats (minimum of 40g) and deliver them to the practice.

**Vaccinating cows and heifers against calf scour** needs to be done one to 3 months pre-calving, depending on the vaccine used.

**Supplementing suckler cows and heifers with selenium** has become more difficult since the long acting selenium injections (eg Deposel) have been taken off the market. These products are not likely to be replaced because of concerns about residues in meat. So, the options now are:

- in feed or in water
- rumen boluses
- free access powdered minerals or buckets

Each method has pros and cons, but whichever method of supplementation you choose, it's important to monitor levels in the animals. To assess selenium status we only need to sample a few animals, so it's not an expensive thing to do (the lab fee to test 5 cows is about £50). Consider checking cows for selenium and **youngstock for BVD** antibody (subsidised testing available).

**Fever Tag Trial Update.** The tags are working well so far. The aim is that the tags will have identified sick calves earlier, so that they are treated before there is significant lung damage resulting in fewer poor doing calves.

**Vaccinating Ewes for Orf.** A recent independent study looking at risk factors for orf found that vaccinating lambs with Scabivax significantly reduced the incidence of disease in lambs, but that the **reduction in disease was even greater when ewes were also vaccinated**. There is also the benefit of reducing orf lesions on ewes' teats. Ewes should not be vaccinated within 7 weeks of lambing or within 7 weeks of housing.

**Feeding ewes pre-lambing.** Have you had your hay or silage analysed yet? If not, make this a priority. The quality and quantity of concentrates that you will need will depend on the quality of the forage. We have expertise within the practice and also work closely with an independent nutritionist to provide you with unbiased advice on feeding your ewes.