



Drying off cows in batches is in full swing on most farms. At this stage most farmers have started their dry off plan with low yielders and first calver's dried off in a lot of herds at this stage. However in view of good milk prices it can be tempting to milk on for some farmers. This goes against best advice and may cause issues next spring. A well-managed Dry Cow period is also the ideal time to recharge your own batteries and hit the ground running when calving takes off next spring. This is vacation period for the dairy herd too and every cow should be managed to calve down healthy in 2025 with an optimum Body Condition Score (BCS) of 3.25 to 3.5, and with a healthy udder and a low Somatic cell Count (SCC).

All cows need to be dried for a sufficient time pre calving or their subsequent yield will be significantly reduced. Heifers and thin cows need to be dry for 12 weeks to give them a break, allow them to gain body condition and replenish the mammary tissue in the udder. Mature cows should be dry for 8 weeks to gain or maintain body condition and to replenish mammary tissue.

The main reason why cows are offered a dry period is to allow them to **regenerate udder tissue**. It also helps to **cure any infections** that may be present in a cow's udder. Research has shown that cows that do not receive a sufficient dry period of will suffer a substantial loss of milk in the subsequent lactation. A shorter dry period may also have negative effect on **milk components, colostrum quality, metabolic status, and fertility**.

The dairy cow needs to calve fit (not over-fat) and should be managed accordingly. Cows calving too thin will struggle to achieve their potential yield and/or go back in calf again. Overfat cows are at a very high risk of suffering from metabolic disorders post calving. Most culling for health problems (70% of clinical disorders) happen at calving time. These problems invariably lead to carry over effects on milk production, health and fertility. Typical metabolic disorders at calving time (often inter-related) include

- Milk fever (clinical and subclinical)
- Ketosis
- Displaced abomasum
- Retained placenta

Sensible feeding in the dry period will help to prevent these from occurring. Well preserved silage at 68% to 70% DMD is the ideal forage, but other forages which achieve the correct results when fed appropriately will also do a good job. Lower DMD silages may require some concentrate supplementation or a longer dry period to replenish body reserves satisfactorily. The same recommendation can help where cows are dried too thin.

Ideally, analyse your silage and supplement according to the results if necessary. Likewise, analyse the silage fed for mineral content. Your mineral supplementation program can then be revised to address any issues encountered.

Mineral supplementation is recommended for the last seven weeks of pregnancy, and all cows need to receive the required allowance daily or issues can arise. There can be big variations in the price of dry cow minerals, but this variation still amounts to less than €1 per cow, whereas getting the specification wrong leading to ongoing problems, could break you financially and mentally. With minerals, accuracy/precision is key, and careful calibration will deliver.

If your silage is very low in Crude Protein (<12.5%), additional protein is required. In herds with low quality colostrum, research has shown benefits of feeding soya or a pre-calver ration in the last three weeks of gestation, leading to better quality colostrum.

Overall, a well-managed dry cow period results in all cows calving at the recommended optimum body condition, and with optimum body/blood mineral levels. Ideally calving should get underway without health issues or any clinical cases of mastitis.