BACKGROUND
There are over 240 million cows used to produce milk in the world, including over 24 million in the EU27, nine million in the USA and around two million in the UK. Commercial milk production is increasing rapidly in southern Asia, including in countries that have not traditionally consumed milk, such as China. Developed countries typically use cows from specialised milking breeds. The Holstein-Friesian type is the dominant breed in the USA, UK and much of Europe.

INTENSIVE MILK PRODUCTION
In order to continue producing milk, dairy cows are required to give birth to one calf every year. Typically they will be milked for ten months and the farmer will aim to have them pregnant again three months after they have calved so there are just two months of the year when they are not milked before the next calf is born. Some of the calves are crosses between a dairy cow and a beef bull and these are reared for meat, whilst the pure-bred female dairy calves will be raised to join the dairy herd. Pure-bred male dairy calves are often not considered suitable to be reared for beef. Many are reared to produce veal but in some cases they are killed shortly after birth.

WELFARE ISSUES
The intensification of dairy farming over recent decades has led to an increasing number of welfare problems:

Breeding
Selective breeding of dairy cattle has led to a dramatic increase in milk yield over recent decades. Milk production per cow has more than doubled in the past 40 years. Breeding and managing cows for high yield often damages their health and has led to a decrease in their average productive lifetime. Modern dairy cows are often worked to the limit of their physical capacity, or beyond. In the UK a cow has on average only three lactations before she is culled due to health or infertility problems, a much shorter lifetime than a suckler cow producing just enough milk for her own calf.

Infertility is becoming an increasing problem in high-yielding cows and is known to be linked to stress and loss of body condition because the cow is unable to keep up with the metabolic demands of milk production by enough intake of nutrition. A cow may also be carrying several kilograms of milk in her udder, making walking difficult. The uneven pressure on the hind feet caused by the large udder can lead to lameness. Studies have shown high proportions of cows are underweight and suffer from lameness and mastitis (a painful inflammation of the udder).
In the USA, the growth hormone bST is injected into cows to increase their milk yield still further; bST is illegal in the EU on animal welfare grounds. When cull cows are sold for slaughter for low grade meat production, they are often transported a long distance because relatively few slaughterhouses will accept cull cows.

**Housing and diet**

Traditionally dairy cows would obtain most of their food during the summer grass-growing season from grazing on pasture and be kept inside only during the winter, when they would be fed mainly on conserved forage (hay or silage). Increasingly, dairy cows are being kept indoors for longer, or even all year round in ‘zero-grazing’ systems. Zero-grazing is common in North America but is also increasing in the UK, especially for large and high-yielding herds. In the most intensive systems cows may be housed in cubicles with solid concrete or slatted floors and no bedding.

Cows kept indoors have reduced opportunity for natural behaviour and exercise and have a greater risk of health problems. Their health may be affected by poor ventilation in the shed, leading to an increase in humidity and risks of infection. Hard concrete flooring is more likely to damage their feet than soft surfaces or pasture and is painful for lame cows to walk or stand on. Increasing the time cows spend housed therefore impacts on foot problems and zero-grazing systems have been found to increase lameness. Housing cows for longer can also increase the prevalence of mastitis.

Cows are ruminants and their digestive system is adapted for a high-fibre low-energy diet. High yielding cows are fed a high-energy concentrate-based diet with relatively little fibrous food in an attempt to meet their nutrient requirements to sustain high levels of production. This type of diet is inappropriate for a ruminant animal’s digestive system and often leads to acidity of the rumen and a range of other so-called ‘metabolic’ or ‘production’ diseases.

**Separation of cow and calf**

In commercial dairy farming, generally calves are permanently removed from their mother shortly after birth. This causes severe distress to both cow and calf and has been shown to have long-term effects on the physical and social development of the calves. In the UK, male dairy calves may be exported to continental Europe to be reared for veal, when they are still too young to cope with the stresses of handling and transport. The export of calves is largely due to the over-specialisation of dairy breeds for high milk yield, which means that the dairy bull calves are not very valuable for beef production.
HIGHER WELFARE ALTERNATIVES
Dairy cows can have a longer productive life and a better quality life in well-managed less intensive farms based on grazing at pasture when the weather allows, with well-ventilated straw-bedded housing when needed. Dairy cows bred and managed for lower milk yields are likely to be healthier and their calves can be more suitable for rearing for meat. Many of these requirements are met by organic dairy standards.

RECOMMENDATIONS
You can help to improve the welfare of dairy cows and their calves in a number of ways:

✓ Join Compassion in World Farming’s campaigns or donate to our work at ciwf.org
✓ Download our Compassionate Shopping Guide at ciwf.org.uk/supermarkets
✓ Contact your local grocery shop and the retail chains and ask them not to stock any milk from zero-grazing farms. Ask them to stock more organic-certified milk, as the cows will have had access to pasture and are likely to have better health and welfare;
✓ In the UK, ask your retailer whether their milk comes from farms that sell calves for export for veal production. Several retailers have already taken action to ensure their suppliers find a market for their calves in the UK;
✓ Only buy organic-certified milk, or try a dairy-free alternative such as soya milk, rice milk or oat milk. Soil Association™ organic standards forbid calves to be sold for live export;
✓ You can find out more about the welfare standards of the major UK food retailers from our Supermarket Survey at ciwf.org.uk/publications/consumers
SOURCES AND FURTHER READING


