

# SHE LOVES RESTING IN FIELDS



## Does it matter if she can't?

This dairy cow descends from the Wild Ox of Europe, Asia and North America. Naturally, she loves roaming and foraging, socialising, mothering and resting in fields.

Yet today, she is often kept in barren and confined farming systems, unable to fully express key natural behaviours. Extreme confinement, mutilation, lameness and mastitis are just some of the things she may endure.

**Welcome to the life of a dairy cow. How you respond to the information in this leaflet could help her lead a happier, healthier life.**

# INDOOR BASED SYSTEMS

No pasture Extreme breeds Exhaustion Lameness Pain

Some dairy farm systems confine the dairy cow indoors permanently. This restricts or completely prevents her from performing important natural behaviours. Being bred for high milk production means she is far more likely to suffer from a painfully large udder, lameness, mastitis, exhaustion and hunger. She may also suffer mutilations.

## PERMANENT TETHERING – FAR FROM FREEDOM

If placed in a continuous tie stall, the dairy cow is tethered by her neck all year, day and night. She cannot walk or graze, move properly or even turn around. Her food is brought to her and she is milked where she stands. A shock wire, which hangs from the ceiling behind her, may also give her an electric shock if she fails to step backwards into the passageway to defecate or urinate. She is likely to suffer from sores and lesions on her legs, and she never experiences being in a field. On some farms, she might be walked each day for an hour to reduce lameness.



## INTENSIVE DAIRIES – PUSHED TO HER LIMIT

Intensive indoor dairies often use a cubicle system. Here, the cow can live amongst hundreds of other cows and may have little respite from dominant animals. As cubicle designs vary widely, she may not have access to bedding material or space to lie down and rest. Resting comfortably is vital to the cow's welfare. She may never go outdoors, graze or lie down in a field. In some cases, she may have outdoor access but it is usually barren concrete or hard earth.



## FIVE FREEDOMS

It is internationally recognised that cows are entitled to Five Freedoms:

**1** FREEDOM FROM HUNGER AND THIRST

**2** FREEDOM FROM DISCOMFORT

# PASTURE BASED SYSTEMS

Access to fields   Natural behaviours   More robust breeds   Better health

Pasture-based systems allow the dairy cow to graze in fields for part of or all of the year and provide indoor housing during winter. With access to good pasture, she can perform many of her natural behaviours. At pasture, she has plenty of space to roam, lie down comfortably next to her preferred partners, graze and avoid her manure. She may be a more robust breed, and is likely to suffer less from pain and disease, living a longer, more natural life.

## CONTINUOUS AND SEASONAL GRAZING – OFTEN COLD COMFORT

A dairy cow farmed in a continuous grazed system lives her whole life outside, in all weathers. She may benefit from grazing during the summer months. However, if the climate is cold and no shelter is provided, the dairy cow endures wet and cold with no respite during winter. On a seasonal grazing farm, she may have access to grazing in summer, depending upon the weather and other factors. She is housed indoors the rest of the year in cubicles or straw yards, where she can lie down comfortably; or she may be in a tie stall.



## ORGANIC SYSTEMS – A HAPPIER LIFE

Depending on local climate, a dairy cow in an organic farm is put out to pasture during spring, summer and autumn, when the weather allows. With access to fields, she can express natural behaviours such as grazing, foraging, resting comfortably and socialising. She suffers less from lameness, mastitis, hock lesions and infertility. In winter, she is housed indoors. She is not given preventative antibiotics, and she generally lives a longer, healthier, happier life.



**3** FREEDOM FROM PAIN, INJURY AND DISEASE

**4** FREEDOM TO EXPRESS NATURAL BEHAVIOURS

**5** FREEDOM FROM FEAR AND DISTRESS

# THE LIFE OF A DAIRY COW

## From birth...

At one day old, a female calf is taken from her mother and put into a pen on her own. Traumatized, she calls out, suckling anything she can find. She is raised initially on an artificial milk substitute. At around two years she is mature enough to become pregnant. The birth of her first calf will trigger her first milk cycle.



## Milking and breeding life

To continue producing milk, the dairy cow typically gives birth to a calf every year or so. Her calf is taken away so her milk can be sold and she is usually pregnant again within a few months. Her strong instincts to protect and nurse her calf are denied and she bellows for her calf for days.



Her calf, if female, may be raised as part of the breeding and milking herd or sold. If there is no market for her, she may be shot at birth. A male calf may be raised for meat, often suffering long distance transport, or he may be shot at birth or shortly after.

## ...to death

She could live to around 20 years. However, in the commercial system, the dairy cow is culled at five or six years old. She may endure long-distance travel to the abattoir. There she is slaughtered using a penetrative captive bolt or through an electro-stun and cut to the throat. Alternatively, in a country without regulations on slaughter, she may be slaughtered un-stunned, feeling pain and fear.



# KEY WELFARE ISSUES

As the world's leading organisation for farm animal welfare, Compassion in World Farming believes that all farming systems must be fit for the farm animals reared in them. We should not make animals fit into systems that cause them pain and suffering, and that deny even their most basic needs as sentient beings.

The following key welfare issues must be addressed through a choice of good cow breed, good living conditions and good farm management:

## MUTILATIONS

The dairy cow may suffer a number of mutilations. As a calf, she may have a portion of her tail removed without pain relief, although this is now banned in the EU. She may also have the buds of her horns cauterised to prevent them from growing - an anaesthetic should be given for this procedure in the EU. A young male calf which is kept for beef production may be castrated without pain relief.



## PAIN, DISEASE AND CONFINEMENT

In the drive for ever higher milk yields, a dairy cow in an intensive farming system is pushed to her physiological limits. Confined, overcrowded and vulnerable to the pain and discomfort of lameness, mastitis, hock lesions, she is denied even her most basic needs and has little or no opportunity to express many of her natural behaviours.



## EXCESSIVE BREEDING

A high-yielding dairy cow such as the modern Holstein is at greater risk of pain and disease, including:

- **Lameness:** an over-sized udder causes her back legs to become skewed, often leading to lameness.
- **Mastitis:** producing large volumes of milk increases her risk of suffering painful mastitis.
- **Infertility and early culling:** she is likely to be killed at a quarter way through her natural life span.
- **Hunger and exhaustion:** she often suffers from exhaustion, particularly if she is producing lots of milk and her bedding is poor or uncomfortable.
- **Physiological cage:** high milk yield forces her to need large quantities of high energy feeds, making it harder for her to get enough nutrition from grass, so she becomes confined to indoor housing.



# DOES THE LIFE OF A DAIRY COW MATTER?

Whether a cow can graze in a field, walk without pain or be milked without the agony of mastitis is determined by the farm system she is placed into, how it is managed and what breed she is. This matters to her. Does it matter to you?

## MAKE IT MATTER

### Five Freedoms

Every farm must provide a dairy cow and her calves with their Five Freedoms

### Extreme confinement

Cows must not be tethered; they should have good housing

### Mutilations

Cows must not experience pain and suffering

### Pasture access

Cows must have appropriate access to pasture and a good diet

### Mortality rates

Cows and her calves must be allowed to live a longer life

### Physiological cage

Breeding cows for excessive yields must be stopped

### Slaughter

Cows must be transported and slaughtered humanely

## FARMING WHERE EVERY LIFE MATTERS

Some farmers have achieved conditions for dairy cows that are far more natural and better for welfare. This is largely achieved through using more natural breeds, such as Montbeliarde and Friesian cows, who are bred for the dual purpose of producing milk and meat. These breeds have longer life spans and lower rates of lameness and mastitis. They are more robust animals with better fertility, and can produce around 7,000 litres of milk per year. The cows are kept outside from spring through to autumn/winter and, unlike most farming systems, the male cows are not killed at birth, they are reared for meat.

Farming systems and practices vary widely across the world. This brochure provides an overview of typical systems and the life of a dairy cow – and her offspring – within them. How you respond to the information here could make all the difference in the world to farmed dairy cows.

For more information about the work of Compassion in World Farming, please visit [ciwf.org](http://ciwf.org)

River Court, Mill Lane, Godalming, Surrey, GU7 1EZ  
Tel: +44 (0)1483 521 953 Fax: +44 (0)1483 861 639  
Email: [research@ciwf.org](mailto:research@ciwf.org)

Printed on recycled paper.

Photos © Compassion in World Farming, iStockphoto and Shutterstock.

Written by Victoria Sacks and Emily Lewis-Brown, 2013.