

# RESPONSIBLE SOURCING



## Production process

DAIRY CALVES

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### Animal welfare considerations

- Colostrum management
- Cow-calf separation
- Frequency and quantity of milk feeds
- Husbandry procedures such as disbudding and castration without pain management
- Individual housing of calves
- Killing or slaughter method
- Transport at young age

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### Definitions

**Calf** – Young cattle with no permanent incisor teeth, either male or female.

**Steer** – Castrated male cattle.

**Heifer** – Female cattle who have not yet produced a calf and under 42 months of age.

**Bull** – Mature male cattle with intact sexual organs and capable of reproduction.

**Cow** – Mature female cattle with eight permanent incisor teeth used for breeding.



Cows are curious, playful and intelligent animals. Descended from Aurochs and the most common type of ungulate, they have been domesticated for over 10,000 years. Most domesticated breeds have horns, although breeding strategies have allowed for more 'polled' (hornless) cows. A cow's natural lifespan can be up to 20 years, however in commercial dairy production a bobby calf will likely only live for 5 days. If the calf is kept as a replacement she will likely live up to 8 years and if the calf is kept and raised for veal/beef then they will live between 6–22 months.

#### **Bobby calf – born, separated, kept on farm for 5 days, transported, slaughtered**

The term 'bobby calves' refers to newborn calves who are less than 30 days old and not with their mothers. Essentially, they are surplus to dairy industry requirements as they are not required for the milking herd. This applies to all bull calves (males) and about one quarter of heifer calves (females) born each year. And, each year, around 450,000 of these bobby calves are destined for slaughter.

Bobby calves may also be killed on farm. This may be done using a captive bolt device or blunt force trauma. Blunt force trauma is not acceptable for killing young calves due to the calf's skull being too hard to achieve immediate unconsciousness through destruction of brain tissue. Blunt force trauma relies on correct and effective application each and every time for it to be humane. Operator fatigue and unreliability are a serious welfare issue for the animal concerned, while persons carrying out blunt force trauma also find it unpleasant.

Bobby calves destined for slaughter are housed together on farm and fed colostrum, milk or milk replacer, usually only once a day. Bobby calves, because of their low value, often do not get the same standard of housing, cleanliness, care or attention as the valuable replacement heifers or the calves being reared for veal/beef. For their health and welfare, bobby calves should be fed at least twice a day and be housed in sheltered, clean and dry environments with room to lie down on suitable bedding.

Transport requirements for bobby calves state that they must be at least five days old before they can be transported to the abattoir. Because they are so young, bobby calves have the following specific animal welfare issues when they are being transported to slaughter:

- Like all young animals, they have underdeveloped 'following' behaviour, which means that they do not stay together as a group and move to where they are supposed to go. This makes moving and loading/unloading difficult and can lead to rough handling.

- They are too young to handle the stress, motion and length of transport.
- During transport and at calf sales, they are exposed to the elements, are not provided with bedding and often have little room to lie down.
- They are too young to be without milk for extended times.

Calves should be handled humanely at all times so they do not become injured or distressed. This means no rough handling, prodding, use of dogs or electric prodders.

Once at the abattoir, young bobby calves are penned (usually overnight) to await slaughter first thing in the morning. All this time they will not have access to liquid feed, they will not be provided with bedding and they will be without their mothers.

**Non-replacement calf – born, separated, reared by calf rearer till weaning, raised till age/market weight required, finished, transported, slaughtered**

In Australia, veal is the meat produced from dairy calves weighing less than 70kg or beef calves (vealers/weaners) weighing up to 150kg.

Calves from the dairy industry may be a pure dairy breed (such as a Holstein) or a dairy cross beef breed (such as Holstein/Angus). After being separated from their mother, the calves usually grow up on specialist calf-rearing properties unless the dairy farmer has facilities for rearing calves. Calves are generally reared in groups in sheds (some with access to pasture) and fed milk or milk replacer and then a grain-based ration. This specialist calf-rearing method results in pink-coloured meat called rose veal.

Vealers or weaners are beef breeds raised on pasture with their mothers. This method of calf rearing results in a light red veal.

The system of veal production where calves spend their entire lives in individual crates with solid wooden sides that do not allow the animal to turn around or express natural behaviours, has never been used in Australia. This system of housing calves for veal production is designed to produce the 'classic' white-coloured veal by denying the calf access to iron. Veal crates have been illegal in the UK and Europe since 2007 but are still used in some countries.

Dairy calves reared to a weight > 70kg are classified as beef. These calves may be reared up until 22 months of age in similar systems to beef cattle before finishing and slaughter.

**Replacement calf – born, separated, reared by calf rearer till weaning, raised till ready to mate, mated, gestation period, calves, joins milking herd**

Female dairy calves identified as replacements often receive the best care and attention on dairy farms, as they will grow to become part of the milking herd later in life. As with the vast majority of dairy calves they will be separated from their mothers shortly after birth. This is done to reduce the risk of disease transmission to the calf (e.g. Bovine Johne's Disease, a bacterial infection that is transmitted through calf contact with contaminated feces), to ensure adequate colostrum and feed intake, and to simplify disease detection. Separation of the calf from the dam also occurs to facilitate milking and management of the cow.

It is common in the dairy industry to house new-born calves individually in their first days or weeks of life. This reduces the risk of disease transmission, because generally there is no nose-to-nose contact between calves, it enables close management of colostrum feeding, and facilitates the initial care of the calf. However, the stress of separating mother and young may be associated with changes in the immune system that affect health/susceptibility to disease. Calves should be at a minimum housed in pairs before moving into group housing.

Replacement calves will often be housed in pens with bedding such as saw dust until they are weaned off milk or robust enough to be housed in an outdoor paddock. Although their diet is predominately milk based until weaning they should have access to roughage from a week of age to encourage the development of their rumen. Once weaned calves will often mostly consume pasture along with other supplementary feed.

Often replacement calves will be agisted on other properties or 'run off blocks' until they are old enough to be mated. Replacement calves, now heifers, reach puberty at around 12-13 months of age, can be mated and conceived as young as 13-15 months. Heifers can be mated either naturally with a bull or through artificial insemination.

Once heifers are pregnant their gestation period will last approximately 9 months. During this period, they will be moved back to the main dairy farm for closer observation and management. If the heifer successfully calves, she will join the milking herd at the start of her lactation.

Each year tens of thousands of dairy cattle are shipped overseas for breeding. Live export standards allow pregnant animals to travel on long and stressful journeys. Heifers may be sent to countries where poor animal handling, transport and slaughter are routine practice and where they are susceptible to diseases against which they have not been vaccinated.

**For more information visit the RSPCA's Knowledgebase [kb.rspca.org.au](http://kb.rspca.org.au)**