

Ask A Vet: Thoughts on Cows from an Old Cowboy

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I grew up on a cattle and horse ranch in Eastern Colorado about 15 miles from the nearest town of Hugo. It is the county seat of Lincoln County and a cow town with about 700 residents. From my earliest memories my life was centered around cattle and horses. After almost 40 years as a large animal veterinarian I've been run over, tossed up, stomped, mashed, and bashed by these critters and I still love them and work with them every day. Besides medicine and surgery on cattle and horses I seek relaxation on my own farm by raising dairy heifers and riding my horses out amongst the curious and contented bovines. The older I get I sometimes find myself using a motorized all terrain utility vehicle instead of one of the horses but I get the same calming feelings from them and I can share it with my wife and the grand kids.

Cows are said to be "the foster mothers of the human race" and they produce about 200,000 glasses of milk in their lifetime. There are about 90 million cattle in the US, of those around 10 million are dairy cows - the first ones coming here with Christopher Columbus on his second voyage. There are more than 800 breeds of cattle around the world, some developed for their high milk production and some for their meat production. Many are dual purpose for both milk and meat. Our area in Indiana is the most concentrated dairy area of the state and the Holstein breed is the most common. Other dairy breeds in the area include Jersey, Guernsey, Brown Swiss, and Ayrshire.

The dairy industry has changed dramatically over the years. It used to take one person one hour to milk 6 cows, now one person can milk 100 cows in one hour with a modern milk parlor. I now have a client that uses robots to milk his cows using laser sensors, computers, and digital sensors worn by the individual cows. These sensors worn comfortably around their necks tell the robots how much to feed the cows, how much they are producing, what their body temperature is, their rumination rate (how well their digestive system is working), and when they are in the right stage of their reproductive cycle to be inseminated. Health problems can be detected very quickly and timely treatment prevents them from getting out of hand.

Cattle owner's livelihoods depend on the health and comfort of their animals and they pay close attention to their animals. Cow comfort is very important in obtaining high production. Cows sleep about 4 hours a day, eat about 6 hours a day, and rest and chew their cud about 7- 8 hours a day. Where they can lay down and rest is very important so free stalls are bedded well with straw, sawdust, or sand. Some producers use special waterbeds for cattle in the free stalls and the cows love them!

The average cow eats about 20 lbs. of hay, 20 lbs. of corn silage, 10-20 lbs of corn. And 6-12 lbs. of protein, energy, vitamin and mineral supplement a day and drinks an average of 35 gallons of water. With the help of her 4 part stomach she can convert this roughage into an average of 6-7 gallons of milk per day.

These noble beasts play an important part in our lives and I hope I have answered some

of the questions you may have had about them.

-Dr. Jerry Sellon