

Automatic milk feeders for calves

Selecting the right system for your farm is no easy task. Sarah Bolt, Technical Knowledge Exchange Manager, Kingshay explores the key benefits and outlines what to consider when making the right choice for your operation.



Automatic milk feeder unit in position, ready for use - drainage is always a key consideration.

Automatic calf feeders are becoming increasingly popular on UK dairy farms, offering a valuable tool to improve labour efficiencies, calf performance, and overall calf management. When used carefully and hygienically, they can help deliver consistently better results.

Potential benefits from computerised calf feeders

The benefits of computerised calf feeders are numerous. They can significantly improve labour efficiencies by reducing the time needed for manual feeding, freeing up valuable hours for important tasks like calf health monitoring and weighing and ultimately driving better performance.

By allowing calves to feed little and often, automatic feeders closely mimic natural behaviour, encouraging earlier concentrate intake and supporting rumen development.

Feeding consistency is another major advantage, as the system ensures every calf receives milk at the correct quantity and temperature every time, something that can be difficult to achieve by hand. In addition, computerised feeders enable individualised feeding curves, allowing calves within the same group to follow tailored regimes to suit their specific needs, which aids better weaning strategies and offers flexibility to rear beef and dairy calves together.

Automated weaning is also possible, gradually reducing milk allowance to encourage concentrate consumption and stronger rumen development.

Lastly, these systems put data at farmers' fingertips, quickly flagging calves that are not drinking their full allocation for early intervention. Some models even track daily weight gains and automatically deliver medicines, providing even greater insight into calf health and performance.

Key considerations when choosing a machine

There is a wide variety of computerised calf feeders on the market, and not all systems offer the same features.



Young calves actively feeding from the automated milk feeding system.

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Consider how many feed stations one machine can support, as this will influence pen design and overall system setup. It is also important to check the distance a feed station can be from the central unit without compromising milk temperature, which could affect calf performance.

Look carefully at the system's software capabilities, assessing what it can monitor, such as disease detection, feeding programme flexibility, and options for remote access.

Finally, check whether the machine offers wireless technology, as cloud-based data storage can allow you to access performance data remotely, supporting more proactive calf management. Others offer additional features such as integrated weigh cells, automated medicine dosing, and teat cleaning systems, that can add significant value.

Automatic milk feeders have transformed calf rearing, but with so many models available, it can be difficult to know which system suits your farm best. That's where 'Tried & Tested' comes in. Just like Kingshay's previous reports described by farmers as the "Which? magazine for dairy". Each feeder reviewed will be scored based on feedback on ease of use, durability, efficiency, performance, and value for money, from farmers like you.

As Sarah Bolt, Technical Knowledge Exchange Manager at Kingshay, explains, "There's no better way to assess a product than to hear directly from the people using it. Peer reviews are especially valuable for big-ticket investments like automatic milk feeders."

If you are considering purchasing an automatic milk feeder for your calves, you might want to also look out for the results of our surveys...

HAVE YOUR SAY: Join our survey

Following the success of our first Tried & Tested survey with Kingshay on cow wearable technology (see results in May issue of British Dairying p28-30), British Dairying and Kingshay are excited to launch the second independent farm equipment review, this time focusing on automatic milk feeders for calves. (Results in the August issue of British Dairying).

We need your input!

Have you bought an automatic calf feeder in the past 10 years? Whether your experience has been good, bad, or somewhere in between, we want to hear from you.

Your feedback will help other farmers make better, more confident decisions; saving time, money, and helping calves thrive.

Take a few minutes to complete our survey and share your experience, please visit <https://forms.office.com/e/nPPDccQaG7>.

Everyone completing a survey will be entered into a prize draw to win a £100 Amazon voucher.