

MARCH 2026

Survey of Consumer Attitudes About Dairy Production

AWI commissioned a survey to better understand how American consumers view certain aspects of the dairy industry affecting animal welfare.¹ The results of the survey showed that a significant percentage of Americans are concerned with the welfare of dairy cows and calves, and that this concern may translate to purchasing decisions.

Survey respondents who stated that they purchase dairy products were asked whether they would be more or less likely to purchase from a producer employing specific practices. The results were as follows:

- **77%** say they would be less likely to purchase a dairy product if they learned that the product came from a producer that **houses cows in a way that does not allow them to easily stand up and lie down.**²
- **77%** would be less likely to purchase a dairy product if they learned that the product came from a producer that **houses calves in a way that does not allow them to easily turn around.**³





- **77%** say they would be less likely to purchase a dairy product if they learned that the product came from a producer that **did not provide appropriate pain relief during and after physical procedures that cause significant pain, such as castration and dehorning/disbudding.**⁴
- **75%** say they would be less likely to purchase a dairy product if they learned that the product came from a producer that **did not provide cows and calves the opportunity for daily exercise.**
- **75%** would be less likely to purchase a dairy product if they learned that the product came from a producer **that transports calves off the farm before 1 week of age without their mothers.**⁵
- **75%** say they would be less likely to purchase a dairy product if they learned that **more than 5% of the producer's lactating cows have injured tails.**⁶
- **69%** say they would be less likely to purchase a dairy product if they learned that **the product came from a producer that branded calves and cows by hot iron or frozen iron/freezing as a form of identification, even when not required by law.**





A clear majority of Americans also agreed more broadly about what they expect from an industry trade group offering welfare-related certification:

- **85%** agree that if a dairy industry trade group certifies producers based on animal welfare standards, then **producers should be required to meet all standards (not just a subset) before receiving certification.**
- **84%** agree that the same trade group certifier should **require every producer to have a written plan for their cows and calves in the event of emergencies** (e.g., fires, natural disasters, temperature extremes, contagious disease outbreaks, power failures).

1. This survey was conducted online within the United States by The Harris Poll on behalf of **Animal Welfare Institute** from February 24-26, 2026, among 2,090 adults ages 18+. The sampling precision of Harris online polls is measured by using a Bayesian credible interval. For this study, the sample data is accurate to within +/- 2.7 percentage points using a 95% confidence level. This credible interval will be wider among subsets of the surveyed population of interest. For complete survey methodology, including weighting variables and subgroup sample sizes, please contact info@awionline.org.

2. In tie-stall housing systems, cows are continuously tethered at the neck to their stall, in some cases if the tether is kept too short, cows may struggle to easily stand up or lie in a comfortable position. Stanchions are a similar but less common housing system where individual cows are secured in stalls by a neck yoke (stanchion). Both systems restrict cows' movement and their ability to socialize, graze, groom, and perform other natural behaviors. Beaver, A. et al. (2021) Invited review: The welfare of dairy cattle housed in tiestalls compared to less-restrictive housing types: A systematic review. *J. of Dairy Science* 104(9), 9383–9417. <https://doi.org/10.3168/jds.2020-19609>.

3. Some dairy operations house their calves for the first few months of their lives in individual hutches, stalls, or pens. Calves can be tethered by the neck to the stall or not be given enough room to comfortably turn around. Calvo-Lorenzo, M. S. et al. (2016) Wooden hutch space allowance influences male Holstein calf health, performance, daily lying time, and respiratory immunity. *J. of Dairy Science* 99(6), 4678–4692. <https://doi.org/10.3168/jds.2016-10888>.

4. In very young animals, when horns have not yet formed, disbudding is performed by removing horn-producing tissue via burning (hot iron) or chemical means (caustic paste). Once horn-producing tissue has attached to the skull, various physical means are used to dehorn, which may be highly invasive. They may involve cutting bone and even entering the frontal sinus of the skull. See *Inhumane Practices on Factory Farms*, ANIMAL WELFARE INSTITUTE <https://awionline.org/content/inhumane-practices-factory-farms>

5. Transport is very stressful for animals. In addition to the vibration, noise, fumes, and unfamiliar environments, transported calves experience prolonged food and water deprivation, crowding, exposure to extreme heat and cold, and physical stress and injuries from rough handling or unsafe driving. Transporting neonatal calves, especially those with unhealed navels, significantly increases the risk that they will contract disease or die during or shortly after transport. See *Long-Distance Transport of Young Dairy Calves*, ANIMAL WELFARE INSTITUTE <https://awionline.org/content/long-distance-transport-young-dairy-calves>

6. Tail injuries and breaks are painful and can significantly impair welfare because cattle constantly use their tails for a variety of things such as communication and fly removal. According to the National Dairy FARM Program, "Tails can be broken, damaged, or injured from items within the facility, such as scrapers, doors, parlors, or a cow stepping on another cow's tail. However, tails can also be broken through inappropriate handling, such as tail twisting, bending, and applying excessive force. About 40% of the maximal force a human can apply results in breakage of a mature animal's tail; much less force is required to break a calf's tail. If cattle are handled following best practices and proper stockmanship, the force required to break a tail is unlikely to be applied accidentally." FARMERS ASSURING RESPONSIBLE MANAGEMENT, ANIMAL CARE REFERENCE MANUAL VERSION 5 153 (2024) <https://nationaldairyfarm.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/FARM-14787-2023-Animal-Care-Standards-Reference-Manual.pdf>