

*Why Grazing is Beneficial  
to Holsteins*

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-Intermediate Division-

Have you ever considered grazing your Holsteins, but weren't sure there were enough benefits for you, and your Holsteins, too? Have you ever dreamed of a truly nutritious food source that is free, in large and lush supply, and which would free you from having to start a machine, tractor, or vehicle to get it? Rotationally grazing your Holsteins is the answer! Grazing Holsteins will give you health, economic and environmental benefits, too. From helping your Holsteins by reducing their foot problems, to-in the end-increasing longevity. Grazing can also save you hundreds to thousands of dollars on bills, such as money spent on grain and to fertilize fields. Finally, when Holsteins graze, they help the environment from allowing you to use less resources such as fuel and electricity, to controlling succession in your fields, paddocks, and pastures. When grazing your Holsteins properly, you will experience these benefits and more. Some will be noticed and can happen immediately, while some will be long-term, and will take time to happen. Grazing your Holsteins could be one of the best decisions you make for you, and your Holsteins, too.

Health benefits for Holsteins is one of the main reasons that many farmers graze. The first benefit to Holsteins from grazing is that foot problems are greatly reduced. Holsteins will not have as many foot problems because they won't be standing on concrete, mattresses, or in manure all day. They won't be as poor-footed or poor-legged either from the result of putting all of their weight on concrete. Other foot problems that they can avoid are general sores, hairy heel warts, and hoof rot. Another benefit to Holsteins is that they will gain muscle from the healthy amount of exercise that they receive from walking

down laneways and around a pasture looking for grass to eat. Also, they will get a more natural diet from grazing. Holsteins will get more vitamin D naturally from the sun, and their diet will contain more roughage, such as grasses, dandelions, clover, and other plants. Next, Holsteins will be under less stress because they will be in a more natural environment that is comfortable to them. Another benefit is that the milk Holsteins will produce will be more natural and nutritious, too. Finally, longevity and quality of life in Holsteins will be increased because of less health problems, better food, nutrition, and surroundings.

Most Holstein farmers agree that the economic benefits is another reason to graze. During the summer months, and any other months of grazing, costs can be reduced because of it. Some of the costs that can be reduced are feed, roughage and bedding, labor, electric, veterinary, and fertilizer bills. Feed costs can be reduced because grass can contain anywhere from twenty five to thirty five percent protein, which drastically limit's the need for grain pellets. Most conventional farms feed a grain to milk ratio of one pound of grain for every three pounds of milk produced per day. For grazing farms with high quality pastures, it is not uncommon to see ratios from one to five, to as low as one to ten during the grazing months. Also, hay and haylage costs may be reduced if you buy any roughage. Bedding costs could be reduced if you buy bedding for your Holsteins, too. Labor costs can be reduced because you won't have to feed your Holsteins as many times during the day versus the non-grazing months. Then, your electric bill can be lower because you won't need to use lights, silo-unloaders, or fans as much. You may have a lower fuel bill because you will not have to run a feed cart or bedding machine as often. Veterinary expenses may not be as high because your Holsteins should be healthier. Finally, fertilizer costs are lowered because the wastes from Holsteins is natural fertilizer to the soil, grass, and ground around them. And finally according to Jason Karsez, the Farming Management Specialist at Cornell University, "even though rates of return [in profit] are very similar for conventional and grazing dairies, the biggest difference is in the amount of capital investment, which may allow for people to get into the dairy business."

Another reason that farmers graze is that it is good for the environment and for their paddocks. First, Holsteins control succession in fields and paddocks, and according to

the Native Habitat Organization, Holsteins stimulate plant growth and increase annual forage yield. Through Holstein's wastes, Holsteins recycle nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, and other plant nutrients and return them to the soil. Also, through their fecal matter, Holsteins feed bacteria, fungi, protozoa, beneficial nematodes, and other micro-organisms found in the soil. These tiny organisms keep nitrogen and other nutrients in the soil in a water-soluble form, allowing them to be slowly released into the environment and ecosystem as a food source. With grazing, Holsteins allow you to use less resources that can be harmful to the environment, such as the bi-products of fuel. When I asked Rob Huydincia, an organic Registered Holstein grazer, if he had ever considered looking into other breeds to "teach" his Holsteins to graze, he answered, "No. I believe that Holsteins have enough genetic capability to be great grazers, and they are. There are enough good bulls to help, too. I want to prove everyone wrong and that Holsteins are wonderful grazers."

Health, economic, and environmental benefits are only some of the many benefits you will see from grazing. You will also see your own personal benefits from grazing your Holsteins. Whether your farm is large or small, organic or not, the amount of grazing you do can effect the amount and degree of the benefits. I have witnessed rotational grazing first-hand, and I believe it is very effective with Holsteins. I also believe that Holsteins are great grazers, and that they have the genetic capability to be even better. I have personally seen a decrease in health problems, financial savings during the grazing months, and environmental benefits to the pastures. The benefits are real, and they are helpful to both Holsteins and the farmer. I've asked other farmers if they are glad they graze, and if they see these benefits, and they all quickly answer with "Yes."

There are many organizations that can help you start grazing now, such as your local Soil And Water Conservation District, as well as the Natural Resources Conservation Service throughout New York State. Besides these helpful groups, there are grants that can be applied for by you and other farmers to build laneways, create and get grazing plans, and help the grazing process begin!