

## Cattle 101: Common Questions about Bovines and Beef

**Q: What is a bovine?**

Bovines are the scientific name for cattle which are raised for beef and dairy products.

**Q: What is a cow?**

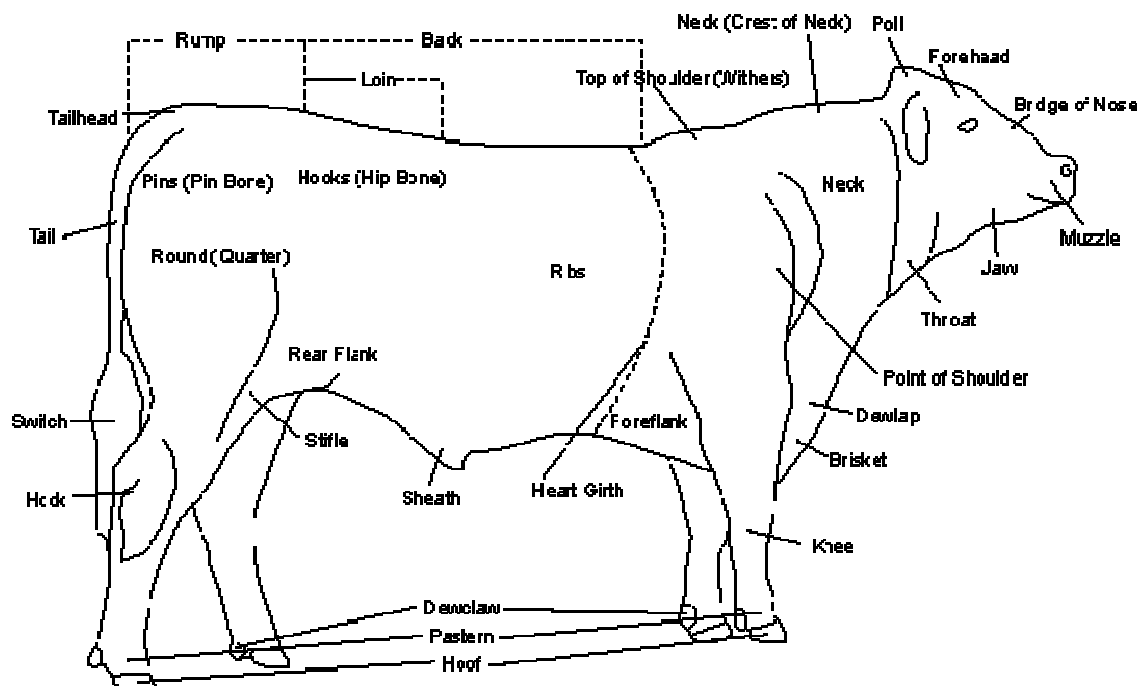
A cow refers to an individual female bovine animal that has produced a calf.

Other terms which refer to different types of bovine animals are:

- Heifer – A young female bovine that has not produced its first calf.
- Bull – Bovine male usually of breeding age.
- Steer – Bovine male castrated as a calf for better meat production.
- Calf – A young, sexually immature bovine animal.

**Q: Why are there different names for part of cattle?**

Specific terms for different parts of cattle help ranchers, veterinarians and scientists communicate about important parts or areas of the animals. Many of the terms used to describe different parts of cattle are very old. They became common over the hundreds of years that cattle have been domesticated. The diagram below shows different parts of a steer.



**Q: What is beef?**

Beef is meat from cattle other than calves (which is veal). The most common age for cattle to be slaughtered is approximately 18 to 24 months old. A live steer at this age will weigh more than 1,000 pounds and generally yield 450 pounds to 550 pounds of edible meat.

**Q: What do cattle produce?**

There are two basic kinds of cattle – beef and dairy. All cows produce milk, however beef cows use their milk to nurse their calves. Beef calves typically stop nursing when they are about six months old. Then, these beef calves will either go on to produce more calves or be raised to maturity and enter the food chain as ground beef, steaks and roasts.

Dairy cows, including cattle breeds such as Holsteins, Jerseys and Guernseys, provide the milk that is processed into dairy products such as cheese, ice cream, yogurt and other dairy products. After their peak milk production years are complete, dairy cattle may also enter the food chain as beef products.

**Q: How many breeds of cattle are there?**

There are more than 70 different breeds of cattle in the United States. It is sometimes difficult to distinguish different breeds based on their color, shape and size, but there are important traits that make different breeds optimal for different parts of the beef and dairy food chain.

Some common beef cattle breeds include Angus, Charolais, Hereford, Limousin and Simmental. Cattle producers have worked for hundreds of years to establish the genetic lines of all breeds. Each breeding program focuses on the characteristics that will yield the highest quality animal and provide an exceptional eating experience for the consumer.

**Q: Cattle are ruminant animals. What does this mean?**

Ruminant animals have a unique digestive system. Instead of one stomach, ruminants have a four-chambered stomach and are able to eat a variety of forage and plants that cannot be digested by humans. In comparison, humans are monogastrics because their stomachs have only one compartment.

The four-chambered stomachs allow cattle to breakdown grass and hay using billions of micro-organisms. The largest chamber, the rumen, functions as the main digestive chamber. Partially chewed grass and hay enter the rumen where it is stored and broken down into cud, which is later regurgitated for further chewing.

**Q: What do cattle eat?**

As cattle grow and move from one section of the production chain to the next, they eat different feeds to gain important nutrients needed to continue growing appropriately.

During the initial phase of beef production, calves live on a cow-calf operation where they are initially nursed by their mothers then roam freely and graze on grass. A majority of cattle in the United States go to a feedlot between the ages of 12 and 18 months to mature further. While not as common, some cattle, referred to as grass-finished, continue to graze on pasture.

To allow their digestive systems to adjust and maintain overall health, cattle moved into a feedlot initially continue their previous diet of grass and hay. During their time at a feedlot, the feed rations shift to a higher concentration of grains so the cattle gain an appropriate amount of weight and muscle mass.

**Q: Where are cattle raised?**

Cattle are raised in every state in the country, but just like the differences in the landscape of each region, cattle production methods differ according to region.

The Western United States has a large amount of land and open space for cattle to graze, so many cow-calf operations are found in this part of the country. Abundant rainfall and forage also make the East well suited for cow-calf operations. The Midwest has ample water and grain supplies, which makes it an ideal area for feedlots.

Producers may raise certain breeds based on the climate of the region. For instance, the Brahman breed adapts well to heat so this breed tends to be more prevalent in the South whereas Angus cattle are more prevalent in the West, East and Midwestern regions of the country.

