

Vitamins in Dairy Nutrition: Balancing Benefits and Challenges

Dr. Vyavahare Pranav Prasad^{1*}, Dr. Kharade Ranjit² and Dr. Vibhu Maurya³

¹MVSc ICAR- Indian Veterinary Research Institute Bareilly

²MVSc, Animal Nutrition, C. V. Sc and AH, OUAT, Bhubaneswar

³MVSc, College of Veterinary Science and Animal Husbandry – A.N.D.U.A.T Kumarganj

Corresponding Author

Dr. Vyavahare Pranav Prasad

Email: pranavvyavahare52@gmail.com



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ABSTRACT

Vitamins are indispensable micronutrients in dairy nutrition, influencing productivity, reproduction, and animal health. Despite their minute quantitative requirement, vitamins play critical roles as cofactors, antioxidants, and regulators of metabolic processes. In practical dairy rations, however, the efficiency of vitamin supplementation is influenced by rumen microbial activity, dietary composition, feed preservation, and management factors. This review critically examines the physiological importance of vitamins in dairy cows, evaluates the potentials of supplementation strategies for optimizing productivity and health, and identifies constraints limiting their efficacy under field conditions. An understanding of these dynamics enables evidence-based formulation of vitamin-inclusive rations that support sustainable dairy production systems.

INTRODUCTION:

Vitamins, though required in trace quantities, are essential organic compounds that regulate a multitude of biochemical and physiological processes in livestock (McDowell, 2006). In dairy cattle,

vitamins modulate immunity, fertility, growth, and milk synthesis through their involvement in energy metabolism, antioxidant defense, and hormonal regulation (Weiss, 2017). Compared with macronutrients such as

carbohydrates and proteins, vitamins often receive limited practical attention in ration formulation, largely due to the assumption that microbial synthesis within the rumen fulfills most requirements. However, variations in feed quality, management, and physiological status of cows may render endogenous production insufficient (NRC, 2001).

The intensification of dairy production, greater reliance on stored forages, and exposure of animals to multiple stressors have heightened the need for strategic vitamin management (Sordillo & Aitken, 2009). Hence, a thorough understanding of the roles, potentials, and limitations of vitamins in practical dairy nutrition is imperative for maximizing performance while ensuring animal welfare and economic sustainability.

1. Classification and General Functions of Vitamins

Vitamins in dairy nutrition are broadly classified into fat-soluble (A, D, E, and K) and water-soluble (B-complex and vitamin C) groups (Goff, 2018). Fat-soluble vitamins are stored in body tissues and their absorption depends on dietary fat and bile secretion. They are crucial in vision (vitamin A), calcium-phosphorus metabolism (vitamin D), antioxidant protection (vitamin E), and coagulation processes (vitamin K). Water-soluble vitamins, including thiamine, riboflavin, niacin, pantothenic acid, biotin, folic acid, vitamin B₆, vitamin B₁₂, and vitamin C, function primarily as coenzymes in energy and protein metabolism (Girard & Duplessis, 2022). In mature ruminants, rumen microorganisms synthesize most B-vitamins and vitamin K; however, under stress or high-concentrate feeding, microbial synthesis may not meet physiological needs (NRC, 2001).

2. Potentials of Vitamins in Practical Dairy Rations

2.1 Enhancement of Immune Function

Vitamins play a vital role in maintaining immune competence, particularly during the periparturient period when cows experience oxidative stress and immunosuppression (Sordillo & Aitken, 2009). Vitamin E, functioning as a lipid-soluble antioxidant, protects cell membranes from peroxidative damage. Supplementation (typically 1000–4000 IU/day during the dry period) has been shown to improve neutrophil function, reduce incidence of mastitis, and decrease retained placenta (Weiss et al., 1997). Synergistic interaction between vitamin E and selenium enhances glutathione peroxidase activity, thereby strengthening immune defense mechanisms (Surai, 2023). Similarly, vitamin A maintains epithelial integrity in the respiratory and reproductive tracts, reducing susceptibility to infection (Chew, 1993).

2.2 Reproductive Performance

Deficiencies of vitamins A and E have been associated with decreased conception rates, embryonic mortality, and abnormal estrous cycles (Goff, 2018). Vitamin A supports steroidogenesis, placental development, and fetal growth, while vitamin E preserves luteal cell integrity by minimizing oxidative stress (Miller et al., 1993). Strategic supplementation during the transition period has demonstrated improved reproductive efficiency and shorter calving-to-conception intervals (Aréchiga et al., 1998).

2.3 Optimization of Milk Production and Quality

While vitamins do not directly supply energy or amino acids for milk synthesis, they influence metabolic efficiency. Vitamin D regulates calcium metabolism and bone mobilization, which are crucial for milk

secretion and prevention of hypocalcemia (Goff, 2018). Biotin, a B-complex vitamin, has gained attention for improving hoof integrity and milk yield in high-producing cows. Daily supplementation (20 mg/day) enhances keratinization of claw tissue, thereby reducing lameness and supporting feed intake and milk production (Lean & Rabiee, 2011). Vitamin E supplementation has been linked with improved oxidative stability of milk fat, leading to better shelf life and nutritional quality of dairy products (Santos et al., 2001).

2.4 Enhancement of Calf Health through Maternal Nutrition

Maternal vitamin status significantly influences colostrum quality and calf vigor. Colostrum from vitamin E and A-adequate cows contains higher immunoglobulin concentrations and antioxidant capacity, enhancing neonatal immunity (Weiss et al., 1997). Deficiency during late gestation compromises passive immune transfer, leading to increased morbidity in neonatal calves.

2.5 Coping with Environmental and Metabolic Stress

High-producing dairy cows experience metabolic and oxidative stress during peak lactation and under heat stress conditions. Vitamins E and C, together with certain B-vitamins (e.g., niacin and folic acid), mitigate oxidative damage, support thermoregulation, and enhance metabolic efficiency (NRC, 2001; Girard & Duplessis, 2022). Supplementation during hot seasons has shown positive effects on milk yield, feed efficiency, and fertility (Silanikove et al., 2016).

3. Constraints to Effective Vitamin Utilization

Despite the recognized benefits, several practical and biological constraints limit the efficiency and consistency of vitamin utilization in dairy cattle.

3.1 Rumen Microbial Synthesis and Degradation

Rumen microorganisms both synthesize and degrade vitamins. While synthesis of B-vitamins and vitamin K reduces the need for dietary sources, extensive microbial degradation of fat-soluble vitamins and some B-vitamins may occur before absorption (Girard & Duplessis, 2022). The extent of degradation depends on rumen pH, feed composition, and microbial population dynamics. Consequently, vitamin availability is unpredictable, particularly in high-concentrate diets that disrupt normal rumen fermentation.

3.2 Variable Vitamin Content in Feedstuffs

Vitamin content in forages and feed ingredients is highly variable, influenced by plant species, maturity at harvest, and storage conditions. For example, carotene (vitamin A precursor) and tocopherol (vitamin E) concentrations decline sharply during prolonged storage and exposure to oxygen (McDowell, 2006). This degradation is especially significant in silage-based rations, necessitating routine supplementation to prevent subclinical deficiencies.

3.3 Nutrient Interactions and Antagonisms

Vitamins interact closely with minerals and other dietary components. The vitamin E selenium synergy is well documented; deficiency in either nutrient impairs the antioxidant system (Surai, 2023). Conversely, high dietary unsaturated fatty acids accelerate oxidative vitamin loss, while excessive iron or copper can catalyze lipid oxidation, reducing vitamin efficacy. Furthermore, high calcium intake interferes with vitamin D metabolism, impacting calcium absorption (Goff, 2018).

3.4 Stability and Bioavailability Issues

Many vitamins are unstable during feed processing, pelleting, or storage. Vitamin A and E are sensitive to oxidation; moisture, temperature, and exposure to light accelerate their degradation. Losses of up to 50% have been reported during pelleting or extended storage of premixes (McDowell, 2006). Ensuring uniform mixing and proper premix handling is crucial to maintain intended vitamin concentrations.

3.5 Economic Considerations and Cost-Benefit Ratio

Although vitamins represent a minor fraction of total feed cost, their economic return is not always immediately apparent. Benefits such as improved immune function or reproductive performance manifest indirectly, often requiring long-term herd data to justify supplementation costs (Weiss, 2017). This uncertainty may lead to under-supplementation, particularly in resource-limited production systems.

3.6 Risk of Toxicity

Over-supplementation, especially of fat-soluble vitamins, can induce toxicity. Chronic intake of excessive vitamin A causes bone fragility, reproductive impairment, and reduced feed intake (McDowell, 2006). Similarly, high vitamin D intake can lead to hypercalcemia and soft tissue calcification. Hence, adherence to recommended upper limits in formulation is imperative (NRC, 2001).

4. Practical Strategies for Optimizing Vitamin Use

4.1 Stage-Specific Supplementation

Vitamin requirements vary with physiological stage. Dry and Transition Period; High emphasis on vitamin E and A to enhance immune competence and calf health. Early

Lactation: Vitamin D and antioxidant vitamins to manage calcium metabolism and oxidative stress. Mid to Late Lactation: Maintenance supplementation tailored to milk yield and forage quality. Strategic supplementation, rather than uniform year-round dosing, improves efficiency and minimizes cost (Weiss, 2017).

4.2 Use of Rumen-Protected Forms

For vitamins prone to ruminal degradation (e.g., niacin, choline, folic acid), encapsulation technologies enhance post-ruminal delivery and bioavailability. Rumen-protected choline has shown positive effects on hepatic lipid metabolism and prevention of fatty liver in transition cows (Zhou et al., 2016). Although costlier, such forms are justified in high-producing herds.

4.3 Integration with Overall Herd Health Programs

Vitamin supplementation should complement mineral balancing, disease control, and reproductive management. Regular assessment of blood or milk vitamin concentrations, in conjunction with monitoring of disease incidence and fertility metrics, helps refine supplementation protocols (Weiss, 2017).

4.4 Quality Control and Feed Management

Implementing proper premix storage (cool, dark, and dry conditions), avoiding prolonged exposure to air, and using antioxidants in feed formulations improve vitamin retention. Periodic laboratory verification of premix potency and uniform mixer performance ensures consistent nutrient delivery to all cows.

4. Emerging Perspectives and Research Needs

Advances in nutrigenomics and metabolomics have opened new pathways for understanding vitamin metabolism at the molecular level.

Studies indicate that vitamins modulate gene expression related to immune signaling, lipid metabolism, and oxidative defense (Bauman & Harvatine, 2020). Moreover, individual variation in vitamin utilization efficiency suggests potential for precision supplementation guided by biomarkers or genomic selection.

Environmental sustainability is another emerging consideration. Optimized vitamin supplementation may improve feed efficiency and reduce metabolic disorders, indirectly lowering greenhouse gas emissions per unit of milk produced. Future research should focus on: Defining vitamin requirements under varying production intensities and climatic conditions; Elucidating interactions between vitamins, microbiota, and host metabolism; Developing cost-effective delivery systems and stable formulations for tropical environments.

CONCLUSION

Vitamins, though required in minute amounts, exert profound influences on the productivity, health, and welfare of dairy cattle. Their potentials in enhancing immunity, reproduction, and resilience to stress are well documented, particularly for vitamins A, D, and E. However, practical constraints, including rumen degradation, feed variability, nutrient interactions, and stability issues often limit the realization of these benefits. A scientific, stage-specific, and evidence-based approach to vitamin supplementation is therefore essential. Integrating vitamin nutrition into holistic herd management not only improves performance but also promotes sustainable dairy production.

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