



Stillbirth ABVs

Breeding for more live calves

Key points

- Two Australian Breeding Values (ABVs) can be used in breeding programs to reduce stillbirths.
- The Sire Stillbirth ABV predicts the percentage of progeny that are born dead.
- The Maternal Stillbirth ABV predicts the percentage of calvings that result in a dead calf.



To breed for fewer stillbirths, select animals with Stillbirth ABVs of less than zero. Always breed replacements from bulls that meet DataGene's Good Bulls criteria.

Stillbirths in dairy cattle

Stillbirth is the leading cause of death (higher than scours and respiratory disease) in Australian dairy calves. The rate of stillbirth is 5-7% in Australian dairy cattle.

Why select for fewer stillbirths?

While there are many environmental factors that contribute to the risk of stillbirth (e.g. first calving heifers, male calves, twin pregnancy and breed), genetics also play a role.

There is enough genetic variation between animals within a breed to enable selection for a lower risk of stillbirth.

From April 2026, DataGene has included Stillbirth ABVs in its evaluation for all dairy breeds: Holstein, Jersey, Australian Red, Crossbreds, Brown Swiss, Ayrshire, Illawarra and Guernsey.

Sire stillbirth and maternal stillbirth

Both calf and cow have a role in a successful calving. From a breeding perspective it is important to breed for calves that are born alive (sire stillbirth) and cows that give birth to a live calf (maternal stillbirth).

The **Sire Stillbirth ABV** predicts the percentage of progeny that are born dead or die within a few hours of birth.

The **Maternal Stillbirth ABV** predicts the percentage of calvings that result in a calf that is born dead or dies shortly after birth.

Using Stillbirth ABVs

Stillbirth ABVs are reported as a percentage above or below 0 where a lower number means fewer stillborn calves.

To reduce stillbirth rates, select animals with Stillbirth ABVs less than zero.

Most Holstein and Jersey bulls fall between -2% to +2% for Stillbirth ABVs. The very best bulls are below -5% for Stillbirth ABVs.

Stillbirth ABVs are not included in any breeding index.

DataGene publishes Stillbirth ABVs in the Good Bulls App, DataVat, and heifer genomic results. Some bull companies may also include Stillbirth ABVs in their catalogues.

The reliability of the Sire Stillbirth ABV in a young genomic Holstein bull is about 60%, similar to the reliability of the ABVs for Fertility and Overall Type.

Acknowledgement

DataGene is an initiative of Dairy Australia and the herd improvement industry. DairyBio provides the research pipeline to develop and maintain Australian Breeding Values.

More information

Technote (for more detail): [Breeding for fewer stillborn calves](#)

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