

Setting them up for success

The 'transition' period (from 3 weeks before until 3 weeks after calving) is one of the most critical periods in the dairy cow's production cycle. The transition period imposes a number of abrupt changes on the cow; physical exertions of calving and lactation, changes in ration and possibly social group. Hormonal and metabolic systems are massively affected which result in increased stress levels and immune suppression. It will come as no surprise that cows are at the highest risk for developing many of the common production diseases at this time; milk fever, retained placenta, mastitis, ketosis and displaced abomasum. As ever, prevention is better than cure and investing in improved transition management will usually pay dividends.

As the cause of most of these production diseases will be multi-factorial, a targeted holistic approach to problem solving and management can have the best results in preventing these conditions. The focus for transition cow management is often mainly on nutrition, and rightly so as ration constitution and dry matter intake (DMI) are key factors in these girls transitioning successfully. However even cows on the best diet in the world will encounter problems if the system is not right. So what can you do to ensure your dry cows are set up for success?

- **Manage cow body condition**

There is strong evidence that changes in body condition score (BCS) across the dry period and excessive BCS loss in early lactation are strongly associated with decreased performance, increased risk of disease and reduced fertility. Under conditioned cows are also predisposed to lameness. BCS monitoring in late lactation can be a valuable tool. Your vet will be able to equip you with the tools to implement a body condition scoring programme or one of our experienced technicians can do the scoring for you. Diets may need to be altered depending on forage analysis and if cows are becoming over conditioned consider segregating them into a 'fat club'.

- **Ensure adequate dietary minerals, vitamins and trace elements**

Milk fever incidence causes considerable expense from prolonged recumbency in addition to an increased risk of toxic mastitis, metritis and an increased risk of culling. Monitor the incidence of these cases and talk to your vet and nutritionist about methods to optimise calcium metabolism. Blood sampling cows within 24 hours of calving can also be used to monitor subclinical hypocalcaemia and assess dietary adequacy. High forage levels during the dry period may result in some rations being low in trace elements. Vitamin E and Selenium are particularly important antioxidants which reduce immune suppression during this risk period and may need supplementing.

- **Cow comfort**

Transition cows should be managed like princesses. Aim to provide ample space for ALL cows ALL of the time (80% occupancy). Deep straw is preferred for calving cows but remember cubicle size and surface should also be optimal for fresh cows to minimise excess standing.

- **Ensure good rumen fill**

This is particularly important on the day of calving to prevent abomasal displacements and ensure cows get off to the best start post calving. Feed space is important throughout the entire transition

period. Aim to have space for ALL cows to eat at once (the more space the better but aim for at least 80cm per cow) to prevent bullying. Palatability is also key but if food isn't available the cows can't eat it!

- **Strategy to ease group moves and avoid social stress**

Cows have a natural social hierarchy which takes time to establish. Any social changes will often reduce DMI, even if only for a few days.

- **Effective monitoring of fresh cows**

Monitoring appetite and demeanour of fresh cows in a strategic manner aids early detection and resolution of any problems. Speak to your vet about implementing one of these programmes on your farm.

Transition cow management holds the key to herd efficiency. If they transition well, they will stay healthy, milk well and get back in calf. Can you afford not to set them up for success?

For further information on Westpoint, please contact our St Columb practice on 01637 889231.

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