
Methods to Improve Animal Care

Dairy Farmers of Canada & Lactanet recently put on a webinar focusing on proAction Animal Care Requirements. The key topics addressed included causes and solutions for hock, knee and neck scores, lameness, and body condition. The first step for improvement is identifying the issue. Next, we must understand how the issue develops to work towards a solution.

Let's start with knee and hock lesions. These injuries are caused by rubbing on hard or abrasive surfaces. This can be from a stall that is not the best fit for the cow, if there is insufficient bedding causing the cow to lie on a hard surface or overstocking. Stalls that allow cows to rest well and have free movement to lunge forward to rise can therefore decrease occurrence of these lesions. Stall sizes should be made based on the largest 25% of the herd, so base your stall sizes measurements of 3rd and 4th lactation girls so we know even the largest cows in the barn can move comfortably. Cows lying diagonally could indicate a stall that is too short, obstructed lunge space, or the brisket board is too high. Finally, bedding needs to be soft and thick enough to support the very tip of the hoof when the cow rises. Amazingly cows will balance a large portion of their weight on the tip of the hoof to rise, and hard surfaces can increase risk of foot injury.

Low body condition scores can be attributed to poor quality feed, poor feed management, too much competition, disease, or lameness. Lameness can be a large issue in our free-stall operations, since our cows need to walk to their food. Addressing lameness promptly when seen can help these cows to continue thriving. Simple solutions to these other listed reasons can include working with your nutritionist, feed mill and veterinarian to ensure good quality feed. Ensure adequate bunk space, 24-30" per cow, and keeping feed pushed up and accessible.

You may have heard before that most lameness starts in the hoof! Both infectious and non-infectious hoof lesions account for more than 90% of lameness cases in dairy herds. Preventative trimming can aid in hoof balance and early identification of disease. A third party can be helpful for locomotion scoring when there does not seem to be enough time in the day. The key to success is first identifying lameness, followed with prompt treatment. 56% of newly lame cows fully recover when treated with anti-inflammatories, a trim and a block, whereas success rates significantly decrease when the time to treatment is prolonged.

Unnecessary mechanical stress to the hoof leads to an increase in non-infectious lameness such as sole hemorrhage, ulcers, and white line disease. Limiting stocking density to 1.2 cows/stall or 120 ft/cow on a bedded pack can reduce standing time on hard surfaces. Other strategies include keeping milking times to less than one hour and allocating 50-55 cows per robot. We must also remember that feet are more vulnerable during calving and transition as the cow undergoes dramatic changes in hormone levels. A deeply bedded, comfortable area to rest during this period can reduce stress on their feet, and in turn, reduce hoof lesions.

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When measuring impact, the hardest surfaces are concrete and rubber, medium surfaces are mattress and waterbed, while the softest surfaces are pasture and sand. While all barns use different bedding mediums, the largest impact can be made by ensuring enough quantity and depth of bedding. With the right stall, a cow can lie for 12 hours per day.

Digital dermatitis (strawberry) is the most common infectious hoof lesion in Canadian herds. It is caused by a gram-negative bacterium that invades cracked or weakened skin caused by mechanical irritation or manure slurry. Good manure management, such as scraping every three hours, and a clean environment is a great preventative strategy. Foot baths can help to kill bacteria, therefore decreasing the spread of infectious hoof lesions.

Finally, when aiming to see change on a farm, we need to move forward with a plan. Summarize your findings and goals. Prioritize 2-3 actions so it's not overwhelming! Set a target date for a goal, and a date to reassess for improvement (eg. In 2-3 months). Develop methods to monitor progress because we cannot manage what we cannot measure! We can see progress in feet within 6 months, whereas improvement in body condition can be observed in as little as 60 days. Did any of these ring clear with your farm? Our Heartland Vets are always happy to help put a farm plan together in how we can improve your practices!

Dr. Melanie Thompson

Covid-19 protocols

With the presence of Covid-19 in Ontario, our team is taking additional precautions during our farm visits, as highlighted below, to help mitigate the spread of this disease in our community. We have chosen to continue strict precautions as we move through Ontario's phased reopening. Please be aware that as this pandemic develops, we may have to adjust our procedures in response.

Veterinary farm visits

- Once on farm, we will try to maintain a distance of at least six feet from people wherever practically possible
- Care will be taken to wash and disinfect hands and contacted tools and equipment before re-entering our vehicle
- A mask will be worn whenever practically possible, especially in closed air spaces or when physical distancing is not possible. We would like our clients to do the same while we are on farm.

Technician farm visits

- Techs will continue to assist veterinarians as necessary. The same precautions as above will apply
- Technicians will continue to provide services, such as dehorning, but we ask that no farm personnel are in the immediate vicinity during their visit

Clinic procedures

- Our clinic will remain open, but business hours may be subject to change
- Clients will be met at the door by one of our customer care representatives
- Purchases will be set out at the door
- Laboratory samples will be received at the door

If you have experienced any Covid-like symptoms or have had exposure to someone with symptoms, we urge you to please notify us before your next vet visit so we can take the appropriate precautions.

We thank you for assistance in helping us continue to provide veterinary care while considering the health of yourselves and our staff.

Stay healthy!

