

Vet Jon Reader from Synergy Farm Health in Dorset, which is part of the XL Vet Group, reflects on the implications of lameness on cow health, welfare and productivity. And at this time of year, as cows go out to grass, cases can increase as their hooves are exposed to outdoor conditions.

Sound cows tracks can help to reduce the risk of white line disease

Go with the flow

White line disease – an all-too-common cause of lameness – can flare up at turnout due to poorly maintained cow tracks. The white line is an area of weakness as it is the joint between the solar and wall horn. This weakness is exacerbated by cows that turn and twist rapidly and a weakened white line is also more prone to damage from stones and other debris. Some sharp stones will penetrate the hoof if the cow is unlucky, even if her hooves are strong. But if you're seeing a lot of cows with poor mobility or lameness caused by white line disease, then it's time to take action.

Risk factors are poor cow flow. Movement in the collecting yard and in feed and cubicle passageways, as well as parlour exits, can all contribute to creating problems. As can poor cow tracks. Some herds have good walk ways to take them out to pasture, but quite a few don't.

Good track materials include oolitic limestone, concrete, rubber tyres and bark. They should be swept regularly and should also be for herd use only – not for farm traffic.

Width is important too – they should be wide enough for cows to pass each other and between 2.5 and three metres wide at least. And cows should be able to amble along at their own pace, not 'pushed' by a quad bike or dog. That way, if there are stones on the track, they will carefully pick their way through them. Cow flow in the collecting yard is important too.

Key 'dos' here are to make sure that there's at least two square metres of space per cow in the yard and don't move the backing gate until you're at least half way through milking.



The encyclopaedia **White line disease**

Cause

Separation of the hoof wall and sole. The joint is weakened by twisting and turning and more susceptible to trauma from stones and other foreign objects.

Symptoms

Poor mobility/lame cows.

Diagnosis

Lifting the foot is the only way to see exactly what's causing lameness.

Treatment

Early identification and

treatment is vital. Affected hooves should be trimmed using the usual Dutch five-step trimming method. Step four is to take the weight off the affected claw, which usually means using a block. Clinical signs of lameness should ease rapidly following this treatment and the hoof will heal in a month or two.

Prevention/control

Examine cow flow around the unit – at housing, in the parlour and outside. Consider using rubber matting in critical areas, such as the collecting yard and parlour exits. Almost all parlours have a 90° turn here and sharp twisting can weaken the hoof.

Adding Biotin to rations can also help to improve horn condition. Just 20mg/day will do the trick, but it's not a quick fix. It can take up to six months to see an improvement.

