

DAIRY

Getting feed trough space right, tracking body condition and benchmarking performance will go some way to preventing issues during the transition period. **Aly Balsom** reports.

Benchmarking helps to improve cow transition

How confident are you the milk fever or metritis 'blip' you are seeing is actually a momentary dip or has it been going on for some time?

Vet Helen Rogers, from Friars Moor Vets, Dorset, argues you can never really know for certain unless you are recording and benchmarking your herd during the transition period.

She says: "It is easy to say you are in a blip, but you might have been in it for longer than you realise. This is why sitting down and looking at data is key."

Her attitude is one reflected by farmers involved in the practice's high yielding benchmarking group. For the most recent of their quarterly benchmarking meetings, the group of 16 herds chose transition cow management as the topic for discussion.

Attention

Dairy farmer Richard Jeanes (*see case study, on page 42*) says looking at disease incidence in the period around calving is a crucial area for attention.

He says: "The transition period is the starting point for

the next lactation. It sets the cow up for a fertile, productive lactation. Benchmarking helps you look at figures so you can see the areas to improve."

The group is predominantly made up of year-round calving herds, yielding from 9,000-12,000 litres. Herd size ranges from 80-400 cows and average dry period is about 60 days.

Farmers were asked to fill out a questionnaire detailing various parameters related to the dry period, including incidence of left and right displaced abo-

masums (LDAs and RDAs), metritis/whites and milk fevers. Trough space per cow, ration metabolisable energy (ME) and refusals were also recorded.

Mrs Rogers says what links all the farms with low levels of disease in the transition period, is high dry matter intakes (DMI).

Condition

She says: "The top farmers are achieving less than 10 per cent of metritis or whites in the transition period, so there is no reason why others should not be able to



Helen Rogers says record-keeping is key to herd management.

Transition performance indicators

BENCHMARKING can be carried out both within and between farms as a useful way of monitoring performance and identifying areas for improvement.

As well as recording individual disease incidence, vet Helen Rogers suggests using one of the following key performance indicators:

1 Monitor transition success rates

Ask yourself how many cows calve without any problems.

Set a target of more than 80 per cent of cows and heifers calving without issues

2 Recording fresh cow milk index

This is based on predicted yields for cows and heifers in your herd. For example, at five days in-milk, a farm might set a target for cows to produce more than 30 litres.

If they do not meet this target, questions can be asked as to why and animals can be checked



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achieve this level. The key is to look at trough space, body condition and diet.”

Vet Julian Allen, who runs the

benchmarking groups with Mrs Rogers, says almost every cow which calves will get a contaminated uterus. However, if they



Almost every cow will get a contaminated uterus at calving, says Julian Allen. If managed well, they should get on top of it naturally.

are managed well and continue to eat, they should be able to get on top of it naturally.

Intake

He says: “It is important to produce a cow which can cope with the challenges around calving. One of the main things which influences dirty cows is the

energy status of the cow before and after calving. A lot of this is linked to body condition score.”

Fat cows with a body condition score of more than 3.5 have reduced dry matter intake and will be more prone to metritis, as well as LDAs and RDAs. Mr Allen says those farms in the benchmarking group with an LDA

incidence at a target level of less than 3 per cent had greater control of body condition and fewer fat cows calving in.

Risk

“One of the things we talked about in the discussion group was how cows can gain weight in the far off dry period, which is a

key risk time. Normally cows should receive a diet of no more than 100MJ ME at this time.”

Higher ME rations in the far off dry period can lead to increased deposits of internal fat which may not actually be reflected in increased body condition. Keeping far off dry cows at grass can exacerbate the