

Many farmers would not normally think of mastitis being an issue for their heifers but, with more cases being identified, a number of vets and farmers are successfully using teat sealants to prevent the disease. Louise Hartley talks to vet Dave Gilbert to find out more.

# Teat sealing heifers can reduce mastitis

vet's  
view



For a lot of farms, heifer mastitis is now a real issue

DAVE GILBERT

Studies from around the world are showing a significant proportion of heifers entering the herd already harbouring an infection.

Although figures vary wildly between herds, vet Dave Gilbert of Lambert, Leonard and May says on average, within his own practice, more than one in six heifers record a high somatic cell count at first recording.

Mr Gilbert says: "Figures vary between herds, but we commonly find about 15 per cent of heifers suffer a clinical case soon after calving.

"This means we are seeing a higher rate of mastitis in heifers than in older cows. Considering the money it costs to get those heifers to first calving, it is an awful shame for their long-term performance to be damaged before it has started.

"The role of the environment in the run up to calving has been identified as a major factor. Most people will now be familiar with dry period infections in connection with milking cows, but would not think about heifers being at the same risk."

## Infection

Researchers claim two-thirds of heifers have open teat ends from two months prior to calving, a figure which increases to almost 100 per cent at the point of calving, says Mr Gilbert.

"Just like cows, open teats leave heifers exposed and, as milk starts to build up in the udder, infections can occur," he says.

Prevention and treatment depends on farm circumstances and source of infection, but the environment is a good place for most herds to start, advises Mr Gilbert.

"Obviously ensuring heifers are kept in a clean, well bedded environment which is not overstocked, is the best prevention - but controlling all risk factors on the average farm can be difficult."

A training session with your vet before using teat sealants is money well spent

DAVE GILBERT

Previous studies have centred on using antibiotics to 'clear' infections but, with growing concerns about antimicrobial resistance and the variable returns achieved, attention is now turning to other options, including teat sealants, explains Mr Gilbert.

"I am sure many farmers think I must be crackers to even consider using teat sealants in heifers, but this is not a new idea.

"In New Zealand, large studies first showed promising results almost eight years ago. Since then, many dairy farmers have adopted the practice, routinely eliminating two-thirds of their heifer mastitis cases."

## Awareness

Until recently it has not been known whether the same will apply in the UK, but with increasing awareness of this issue, some vets and farmers are trying it.

Mr Gilbert says: "Over the last couple of years we have been working with a handful of local dairies to investigate the effectiveness of teat sealing heifers.

"Of critical importance is how the procedure is conducted. Farms already using selective dry cow therapy will know how vital good disinfection is, but this point cannot be overemphasised.

"In the absence of an antibiotic, failure to thoroughly disinfect teats is a real risk and can result in infections actually being infused.

"I would always tell clients a training session with your vet before using teat sealants is money well spent."

Having carried out teat sealing on about 400 heifers, Mr Gilbert says they generally tolerate the procedure surprisingly well.

"We often forget, usually when we are tubing a heifer for the first time she has got mastitis, a distinctly painful condition - therefore it is hardly surprising they kick out.

"In contrast, provided heifers are handled quietly, we rarely see anything more than a little fidgeting with the teat sealing and no-one has been kicked to date."

Work on teat sealing at Lambert, Leonard and May is ongoing and the initial results have been promising. Almost 400 heifers have calved following teat sealant treatment and, compared to their peers, have suffered 80 per cent less mastitis in the first 30 days of lactation.

"I am sure we will see more research in this area in the coming years, but the message for me is clear. For a lot of farms, heifer

mastitis is now a real issue and is costing money," says Mr Gilbert. "If you are suffering more

than one case of mastitis in every 12 heifers calved, it is worth discussing options with your vet."



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