

AT RISK COWS

Immediately after calving, bacteria can be isolated from the uterus of virtually all cows. Over the next 40-50 days most cows clear these bacteria as the uterus contracts and prepares for the next pregnancy. However 10-20% of cows do not clear these bacteria and instead they develop an inflammatory bacterial infection in the uterus known as endometritis.

Cows with endometritis have slightly reduced submission rates and very poor conception rates. As a result, they tend to be late to conceive or empty. On average, dirty cows take about 3 weeks longer to conceive and have empty rates 10 to 30% higher than cows that are clean. This disease is particularly common in cows which have complications in the pregnancy or calving, the so called 'At Risk' cows. These cows are less efficient at clearing the bacteria from the uterus after calving.

An 'At Risk' cow can be defined as any cow that does not have a normal, natural, uncomplicated pregnancy and calving, so includes the following;

- Retained foetal membranes (cleaning's)
- Stillbirth, or a calf that died within 24 hours of birth
- Difficult calving
- Twins
- Milk fever around calving time (uterus does not involute normally).

Research from NZ and Australia showed that treated cows can conceive about 2 to 4 weeks earlier and their empty rates can be reduced. Treatment helps to bring their fertility back into line with the rest of the herd with very significant cost benefits through:

- Extra days in milk
- Fewer empties
- More AB calves to select from
- Less wasted semen
- Fewer inductions

The return on investment (ROI) from treatment has been estimated conservatively at between 3:1 and 8:1, just from extra days in milk and reduced empties. The sooner the dirty cows are detected and treated the better the results. This is because the treated cows then have longer to recover before the start of mating, maximising the improvement in their fertility.

We recommend treatment of all at risk cows as soon as the cow's uterus returns to normal size—about 2 weeks after calving. The options for treatment include intra-uterine treatment or injections with specific antibiotics that have claims for treatment of uterine infections. We had very encouraging results using a new long acting nil-milk with-hold period on cows detected as “dirty” during early scans in December last year. All cows treated with one injection subsequently got in calf, including cows that had very smelly uterine discharges.

Another tool that has become popular over the last few years is to metricheck the herd prior to mating. Our experience has been that in herds that identify and treat at risk cows early, we have found no other cows with pus, which suggests there does not appear to be any additional benefit from metrichecking the rest of the cows in these herds. However, Australian trials did show that a further 6-10 % of non “at risk” cows may also have endometritis.

We suggest you discuss the options with your vet.