

Health Risks for Dry Cows

1. Mastitis

After drying off mastitis may become an issue as there is an increase in the risk factors associated with mastitis such as high stocking densities and exposure to faecal contamination of the udder, increased stress due to diet changes, restricted water access, management changes, no regular teat sanitation, poor teat sanitation with instillation of dry cow therapy, no dry cow or teatseal treatment at drying off, high udder tension and leaking milk and mineral deficiencies e.g. copper, selenium.

Mastitis in dry cows may be severe, as it may develop for a number of days prior to detection. The cells protecting the udder are easily overwhelmed as they are busy cleaning up the old secretory cells that are sloughing off as part of normal udder involution. Treatment of dry period mastitis can be difficult as the distribution of antibiotics via the intramammary route is less efficient.

2. Metabolic disease

Often the restricted diets of dry cows will result in too little calcium and magnesium being taken in by the cow. Dusting causmag helps, but if you stop for a few days because the weather gets wet and cold, there is a risk that blood levels will drop quickly and result in down cows. Occasionally cows on an all grass diet will experience acidosis if the grass is too lush, which can upset the calcium balance in the cow and result in down cows.

3. Nitrate poisoning

Young pasture, in particular if it contains annual ryegrasses, are prone to rapid growth in the right conditions, and can take up large amounts of N. Hungry cows with poor rumen function can suffer from a build up of nitrate in the blood when grazing this pasture, resulting in death or abortion.

4. Trucking Injuries

Cows going to and from grazing, or cows purchased at sales, are often exposed to injury of the legs and feet. Occasionally we see teat and udder injuries from cows that have been down in a truck. Cows should be examined closely when they come off the truck, and all wounds cleaned thoroughly with a water from a hose, and antiseptic spray applied. Due to the risk of infection penetrating to important structures like tendons and joints, antibiotic treatment is recommended. Seek advice from your vet if you are concerned about any injury.

5. Underfeeding

Maintenance feeding is based on survival of cows only and not on maximizing well being and setting the cow up for the next lactation. Remember that the rumen is a musculature organ that needs constant exercise to stay in shape. Restricting cow intakes to build up pasture cover will result in diminished rumen size, and reduced cow intakes post calving.

6. Bloat

Restricted feeding will inevitably lead to poor rumen function and reduced rumen space. "Frenzy feeding" on cold, lush, highly digestible pastures may lead to cases of bloat.

7. Exposure

Dry cows are not as efficient at managing body temperature as milking cows, and are more prone to hypothermia, especially if they are in poor body condition. This season trying to preserve feed by holding the cows back on an all grass diet could result in cows dying from exposure.