Looking after your heifers

Although it may be the last thing on the mind whilst dealing with frozen pipes and snowdrifts, keeping a close eye on your heifers is critical for the future of the herd. Weight at bulling and first calving have a key bearing on lifetime performance. Given that heifers only start paying back on their investment once they reach their 3rd lactation, paying some attention to them at this critical stage can pay dividends.

- Keep a regular eye on liveweight gain (LWG), especially during the summer when they may be out on outlying pasture. The aim for a Holstein heifer is a steady LWG of 0.7 kg per day throughout the rearing period. This should enable them to reach around 400 kg at service (60% of mature weight) and 600 kg at calving (85 - 90% of mature weight) at 24 months of age.
- Appropriate supplementation may be necessary if grass intakes are poor.
- The ideal way to keep an eye on liveweight gain is regular weighing, but this can be difficult depending on facilities. Wither height can give an estimate of liveweight.
- Reliable trace element and mineral supply is essential for growth, and blood testing can be useful to check on status prior to bulling.
- Make sure that they are vaccinated against lungworm before grazing. They need two doses of vaccine four weeks apart, with the second dose two weeks prior to turnout.
- Other vaccines (against Bluetongue, BVD etc.) may be necessary. All vaccine courses must be finished well before service.
- Speak to your vet about an appropriate worming regime for the calves during their first grazing season.
- Fly control is also important during the summer to prevent diseases such as strike, New Forest eye and summer mastitis.
- Treat any lameness problems quickly to reduce problems once they enter lactation.
Is Johne’s disease lurking?

Johne’s disease is a chronic wasting disease of cattle and other ruminants caused by the bacterium *Mycobacterium avium* subspecies *paratuberculosis* (*Map*). Whilst we have known about this disease for many years, it is now attracting the attention of the public health authorities due to possible links with Crohn’s Disease in humans. As such, we should try to be ahead of the situation and attempt to reduce *Map* infection in UK dairy herds.

The initial signs of Johne’s disease are reduced milk yields and poor fertility, and affected cows start to lose body condition. Profuse diarrhoea then develops with wasting, most commonly in animals at three to five years of age. There is no treatment for clinical cases.

The *Map* organism is very long-lived and persistent, and is produced in large numbers in the dung by clinical cases of Johne’s disease. The most common route of infection is calves suckling teats with faecal contamination, drinking colostrum from affected dams or from the environment. The infection then slowly develops in the calf, until it causes clinical disease much later in life.

One of the main problems is that the tests for infected cattle are not 100% reliable in the early stages of disease. Apparently healthy animals will test negative yet still be infected with *Map*, as the antibody response does not fully develop until the later stages of disease.

How can we screen a herd for Johne’s disease?

- A **bulk tank milk antibody** test may help initial screening for the presence of Johne’s.
- Blood testing **suspect clinical cases** (thin cows with diarrhoea) or cull cows.
- **Regular blood testing** of a proportion of cows in the herd can help early detection.
- NMR and CIS are both now offering Johne’s testing of **individual cow milk samples** on a three monthly basis, which may help pick up *Map* infected animals more quickly.

The main source of infection is **purchased stock**, especially as there are currently no reliable tests to guarantee freedom of infection. Check before you buy in.

In infected herds, main control measures are:

- Do **not** feed pooled colostrum or discarded milk to calves as it will spread *Map*.
- Discuss **colostrum management** with your vet. Options are to give colostrum from the mother only or from proven uninfected cows, and then rear on milk replacer after.
- Remove clinical cases and Johne’s positive animals from the herd as soon as possible.
- Do **not** breed from the offspring of infected cattle.
- A **vaccine** is available but has some important disadvantages, and will not remove infection from the herd.

Controlling Johne’s disease in a dairy herd is not easy, and sitting down with your vet to discuss the possible options is critical.

Change of website

In their infinite wisdom, the University have redesigned our website again – only the second overhaul in two years! We therefore have a new website address (at the bottom of the page). The old web address will still work for a while, but please change your bookmarks to the new website. As usual, any comments on the upgraded website more than welcome……