Managing Metabolic Health

With plenty of grass around and long summer days it seems logical to get the dry cows out and have the next generation delivered al fresco. However, calving cows outside in the summer is not without risk despite the picture of rural idyll.

The most common complication of managing pre-calving cows in this way is milk fever. Even when a degree of feed supplementation or mineral supplementation is provided the risk of milk fever remains high on many units. At calving the calcium requirement of a dairy cow increases massively with the onset of milk production. To supply this demand she not only absorbs calcium from her diet but she also requires calcium mobilised from her bones which act as a reserve. We tend to see more milk fever in older cows as their bones are harder and the calcium is less readily available. In order to get the calcium moving, cows need a diet which is high in magnesium and low in calcium pre-calving which is where having a diet based on grass can cause problems.

Many diets which are grass based have a high level of potash which limits the absorption of magnesium. Potash levels are particularly high in heavily stocked pastures and those that have had slurry applied. The risk of milk fever can be reduced by avoiding these high potash forages and high risk pastures. Supplementing magnesium is also helpful in this period, this can be done by a variety of mechanisms such as magnesium boluses, magnesium salts added to feed or water supplies and high magnesium minerals/dry cow concentrates. The risk of milk fever can be further reduced by giving calcium boluses at the point of calving and in the first 24 hours after calving.

Ketosis is the other commonly seen metabolic issue in cows calved at grass with subsequent high rate of LDAs. A diet consisting largely of grass, especially early in the grazing season, provides an oversupply of energy leading to increased condition score. Cows which gain excess condition in the dry period are at high risk of fat mobilisation syndrome which reduces liver function and leads to ketosis. These animals are also more susceptible to infectious diseases. Kexxtone boluses continue to prove very effective at reducing the risk of ketosis in high risk cows as part of a well-managed transition plan.

These are just two common examples that we encounter this time of year which put the cow’s metabolic health at risk. Metabolic diseases have an immediate impact as they produce visible symptoms and emergency cases which require treatment and often veterinary intervention. These cases have an obvious financial cost, are pretty time consuming to deal with and don’t always respond to treatment resulting in forced culling.

Metabolic issues also occur sub-clinically, so for every downer cow you get with milk fever you probably have 5 or 6 with sub-clinical milk fever, the same is true for ketosis. Sub-clinical problems can be just as costly as the obviously sick cows. These cows have reduced metabolic performance which will impact on their yield and their conception rate especially around the time of first service. Focusing on metabolic health to ensure that all cows start lactation well and achieve the level of production they ought to and are being fed to is essential for profitable milk production. Maximising reproductive efficiency is another key ingredient for profitable milk production.

If you would like to review your dry cow program or improve your fresh cow performance speak to your vet. We have a number of tools available to help avoid these costly metabolic issues.
Parasite season

Just a quick reminder to keep up to date with your parasite control this summer.

We are seeing some cases of lungworm aka husk in young stock and in first and second grazing animals. There is good evidence that worming these animals now will improve their dry matter intake which helps put a bit more milk in the tank.

Exposure to lungworm can be fatal if left untreated but even milder cases can cause significant long lasting lung damage. There are several convenient to use products available with zero milk withdrawal for use in milking and close to calving cattle. Continue to use fly control products at the recommended intervals to reduce their populations. They are not only a nuisance to stock, they can also cause some pretty nasty diseases such as fly strike (maggots), new forest eye and summer mastitis.

Speak to one of the vets or Mark Pass at Beeston for more information on which products to use and the best time to use them.

New vets

Look out for a few new faces in August; we are delighted to have Dan and Sam starting with us this month. Both are coming straight from vet school but have lots of practical farming experience and are keen to get started. More about them next month!

Congratulations!

A special mention this month for Adrian Smith and the team at Brook House Farm, Bostock. They have won the supreme champion award in the Cheshire farms competition and hosted a very pleasant farm walk to celebrate.

They are very effective at producing milk from forage and have invested over the years in excellent cow comfort as welfare is a big priority. Congratulations to you on achieving this success!

Flint and Denbigh show

If you fancy a day out on the 20th August why not come and see us and everything else on display at the Flint and Denbigh show. We will very shortly be opening our new premises in Mold, near the livestock market, and have decided to support the local show this year.

Hope to see you there; we even have some vets who speak the language!