PREVENTION AND CONTROL OF DIGITAL DERMATITIS

Digital dermatitis is now the most common infectious cause of lameness and one of the top three causes of lameness, with over 70% of herds affected. Control of this disease should be a major part of any herd health plan.

KEEPING FREE OF DIGITAL DERMATITIS

Dairy herds without dermatitis have a significant economic advantage that is worth preserving. The four main ways of introducing digital dermatitis onto a farm are:

- **Purchased cows:** Cows can carry digital dermatitis without visible lesions. Any cow is a potential source of infection so if possible keep a closed herd. If you have to purchase cattle, source them from herds with no history of digital dermatitis.
- **Hired or purchased bulls:** Remember that bulls can carry digital dermatitis.
- **Visitors:** All visitors (and their vehicles or equipment), whether they handle cows’ feet or not, are potential sources of infection. Thorough disinfection of vehicles, clothing and equipment can significantly reduce the spread of the disease.
- **Sheep:** Bacteria similar to those found in digital dermatitis have been identified from cases of contagious ovine digital dermatitis. Until research confirms whether spread from sheep to cattle can occur, do not introduce sheep onto the farm.

COW MANAGEMENT AND DIGITAL DERMATITIS

- Heifers in early lactation are more prone to infection, housing heifers in straw yards for the first six weeks will reduce the risk of infection.
- Exposing heifers to the disease will not build immunity.
- Examine dry cows for signs of the disease and treat if required.
- Individual susceptibility to the disease varies. Whilst some cows appear immune, cows with infection in one foot have an increased risk of further infection.
HOUSING MANAGEMENT AND DIGITAL DERMATITIS

- Slurry is a major factor in the spread of digital dermatitis. If slurry is deep enough to cover the bulbs of the heel, then digital dermatitis will increase. Slurry damages the skin, allowing bacteria to invade more easily. Deep slurry may also allow the transfer of bacteria from cow to cow.
- Scrape frequently to keep areas clean and remove as much slurry as possible at each scraping. Check that automatic scrapers are working properly at least once a day. Ensure that tractor scraping removes material from immediately behind each cubicle.
- Avoid allowing pools of slurry to form. For this reason, tractor scrapers are preferable to automatic scraping.

CONTROLLING DIGITAL DERMATITIS: THE KEY FACTORS

- **Do not buy in digital dermatitis**: If you have to purchase, purchase only from herds without digital dermatitis and quarantine all cattle.
- **Inspect feet regularly**: Assess the proportion of cows with digital dermatitis and the severity of the lesions at least weekly.
- **Treat early**: Treat as soon as the number of cases of digital dermatitis increase or severity worsens.
- **Treat often**: Do not expect a single treatment to eliminate digital dermatitis.
- **Use footbaths carefully**: Clean feet and clean footbath are essential.
- **Treat severe cases on an individual basis**: Do not expect footbaths to work in cows with severe digital dermatitis.
- **Good slurry management**: Reduce as much as possible the contact between slurry and cattle feet.
- **Have a control plan for digital dermatitis**: As part of your veterinary herd health plan.

MORE INFORMATION

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