

Newsletter July 2011

We have run two BVD and Johne's awareness meetings over the past few months. These meetings are funded through the South West Healthy Livestock Initiative (SWHLI), and allow for 70% funding towards disease surveillance and risk analysis specific to your farm. This can be of particular benefit to beef suckler herds. We are now holding a waiting list for anyone else who is interested in taking part before arranging our next meeting. Please call the office if you are interested.

Milk fever cases seem to have spiked over the past month, with many dry cows at grass, the good growing conditions have contributed to this. As I will go on to discuss, grass does not form a satisfactory dry cow diet alone. The ideal diet should prepare the cow for the next lactation whilst providing a balance of salts that will reduce cases of milk fever. The 'springing' cows (last few weeks pre calving) should have a diet that provides ample roughage in order to allow for rapid expansion of the rumen after calving. It should also provide part of the diet that will be available post calving in order to condition the rumen and prepare it to digest large quantities of feed.

The salts tend to be divided into two categories, those that are positively charged (cations) e.g. sodium, potassium, and those that are negatively charged (anions) e.g. chloride, sulphur. In a pre-calving diet we want a diet rich in anions and low in cations. This will encourage cows to absorb more calcium from their diet and enable calcium and magnesium reserves to be drawn from the skeleton. They are therefore less likely to succumb to milk fever.

The correct balance can be achieved by feeding supplementary salts such as Magnesium Chloride but can also be managed by selecting feedstuffs with a favourable balance of anions and cations. Examples of feeds with an unfavourable balance tend to be grass based i.e grass silage and fresh grass, but also includes fodder beet and kale. The feeds with the most favourable balance are brewer's grains, rape and corn (barley, wheat or oats). Examples of feeds that are fairly balanced are straw, maize silage, wholecrop and hay. You can see how it is possible to balance high risk grass with some brewers grains and get a favourable salt balance, especially if some straw or maize is added. If you have no alternatives to feed than grass then it is essential to add salts to counterbalance the effect.

It is also worth considering the management of your calving paddocks. Potassium (K) is detrimental to milk fever so steps can be taken to reduce the level of K. Avoid spreading manure or slurry on these fields, pick a field with more meadow grasses than ryegrass and clover.

Don't forget that milk fever cows tend to be those that go on to develop retained cleavings, whites, displaced abomasums etc etc. It is believed that milk fever can have sub-clinical effects, so those cows with lowered blood calcium that do not go on to produce a 'down cow' can still have all of the problems listed above.