



---

## Fresh cow health – a glass half empty?

---

The transition period is extremely important in determining future health, milk production and reproductive success of the dairy cow. Traditionally the transition period is considered to be 3 week pre and post calving as the cow transitions from the dry period to the milking herd. There is a risk on some farms that dry cows are set aside and deemed relatively unimportant until they become the “money makers” again during lactation. However how dry cows are managed in the dry period is critical to their performance in the first 60 days of lactation. A cow’s lactation begins at dry off, failure to manage cows

effectively through the dry period can result in significant losses. Many farms have a transition and fresh cow program that is running as a glass half full, in that only 55% of cows may reach 30 days in milk with no adverse health event such as a calving difficulty, mastitis, metritis, lameness, ketosis etc. Many dairy producers are aware of adverse health events post calving but many find difficulty in reviewing this on a regular basis and involve the farm team. Great farms can achieve in excess of 80% of cows passing 30 days in milk with no adverse health event.

AHDB have developed a very simple wall chart to assist dairy producers monitor and track transition success by means of a simple wall chart as shown below. Simply each time a cow calves her number is written in a box for the month. A number of coloured stickers represent varying health events. If the cow endures an adverse health event within the first 30 days in milk a coloured sticker is placed in the box alongside her number. This can produce a very visual and easy to use tool to engage the farm team with and to total up at the end of each month to determine how successful transition has been.



These charts may assist you and your farm teams in developing a simple but consistent way of reviewing transition success on farm. This may also help in developing a recording system enabling you to record transition health-vents within DC305. Please do get in touch if you would like a copy of the wall chart. Crucially if concerns are raised with regards to transition cow health an investigation is warranted to reduce the risk of cows still due to calve. The Technical Services team can assist you and your customer in understanding what risk factors may have occurred and which may be likely in the near future.

It is important to note this chart primarily engages customers in clinical disease recording. A number of the diseases or syndromes outlined above can occur “sub-clinically”. These sub-clinical disorders such as sub-clinical hypocalcaemia (sub-clinical milk fever) or sub-clinical ketosis, typically do not have clinical symptoms that are apparent at the time, and are considered “iceberg” diseases but are considered more costly than

clinical disease at a herd level. “Iceberg” diseases are those where we only may see a few cases of a problem – but these are only the as seen cases – the tip of the iceberg as it were. There will be many more sub-surface or “subclinical” cases. These sub-clinical diseases often impact the dairy more than classic clinical disease for, as an example, every cow with clinical hypocalcaemia - the tip of the iceberg there may be 10 or 15 “sub-surface” with subclinical disease. The increased economic cost is attributed to the greater number of cows with subclinical versus clinical hypocalcaemia even though a subclinical case may cost 40% of a clinical case. Blood sampling of fresh or dry cows to investigate calcium, betahydroxybutyrate (BHB) and non-esterified fatty acids (NEFA) is required to determine subclinical disease risk ongoing.

One way to assist your dairy producers is to determine the number of cows due to calve on a weekly basis in the forth coming months and look for pinch points

where there are spikes in the number of cows calving over a 3-weekly basis. These periods can often result in overstocking at the feed face, this may also be an issue in the far-off dry groups if dairy producers have been drying cows off earlier due to the current milk price and volume reduction requested more recently due to the effects of COVID-19 on the dairy market. It is also worth considering discussing with customers the timeliness of cows moving into the close-up groups within the dry period aiming for 21-28 days. If you need any assistance in developing management lists to support customers with this, please do contact the TAG team. In the mean time, I encourage you to be proactive and review if the farms you work with today have great fresh cow health or are running their programs as a glass half empty. Transition and fresh cow health is the cornerstone of achieving peak milk and great reproductive performance and you can make a real difference for the farms you work with.

**By Jon Mouncey**