

Transition Cows - some things to Remember

With months ticking by, the time of year has come when cows are dried off and soon will be ready to calve. One of the most important stages of her year are the last 4 weeks of pregnancy and the following month in early lactation. Known as the *'Transition Period'* a cow faces many challenges in this period and the outcome of these challenges can affect the success of this and future lactations. The major health issues include milk fever, retained placenta, ketosis, reduced reproductive performance, mastitis, downer cow syndrome and other flow on metabolic and production problems. Milk fever is a condition whereby blood calcium levels drop, generally close to calving, due to increased requirements for milk production. Hypocalcaemia occurs when this calcium drain exceeds the body's ability to mobilize calcium reserves from the skeleton and absorption from her diet. This interferes with muscle function throughout the body, reducing strength and appetite. Clinical signs are unique and include excitement, muscle tremors, twitching and ultimately death if untreated. The importance of lead feeding cannot be emphasized enough, as 80% of disease costs in adult cattle occur in this period. Transition Diet does not just mean feeding anionic salts to enable a cow to mobilise calcium, but refers to the whole diet fed to your herd 2-3 weeks before calving. They are fed both to help prevent metabolic disease and to adapt the rumen's microbe population for a higher density, higher energy and protein level diet of early lactation.

Mobilisation of calcium starts to occur 35 days before calving which is why some calcium in the diet is required, particularly when feeding anionic salts, as the acidotic conditions they promote puts further drain on blood calcium. It is very important that Springer Cows receive a minimum 14% protein diet and a large Holstein requires up to 120 MjME per day in the 2 weeks prior to calving to maintain foetal growth and body condition. She also requires adequate magnesium, which is vital for parathyroid activity and calcium mobilisation. Feeding a specialized lead feed provides increased energy and can be a good source of quality bypass protein, which is important since the unborn calf takes 50% of the protein-building amino acids that pass by the placenta. A cow is genetically programmed to maintain foetus health, at the expense of her own health if required, so meeting her needs are critical. After calving, your herd requires a large amount of dietary calcium, as only around 100g is available to be mobilized from her bones.

There are a number of different additives that are available to help prevent early lactation metabolic disease and maximize milking and reproductive performance during lactation. For more information on maximizing your herd's health and productivity please talk to your technical services representative.

