

Diet management can help to reduce DAs

Taking time to ensure complete diets are thoroughly mixed can make a difference to the incidence of left displaced abomasia (LDAs). And the advice isn't just relevant to winter diets.

The move to all-year-round calving has resulted in high yielding cows being turned out to grass and this has led to an increased use of partial TMR diets to provide buffer feed. This year's variable grazing season means many farms have fed more buffer than usual.

"LDAs have become a year-round problem with data from NADIS showing a 23% increase from January to April compared with last year," explains Bill May, partner with Cheshire vets Lambert Leonard and May.

"The abomasum or true stomach usually lies on the floor of the abdomen but can become filled with gas and rise to the top of the abdomen on either the right or left side. The most common occurrence is when it moves across and beneath the rumen to lie on the left side—an LDA.

"In cows which suffer LDA, the motility of the abomasum is often reduced, allowing gas to accumulate in this stomach. This causes it to rise to the top of the abdomen."

LDAs require veterinary intervention. This usually involves replacement by either rolling the cow, 'togging' or (preferably) surgical correction. Affected cows are often also suffering from aceto-naemia and other post-parturient diseases, which require appropriate medical and supportive treatments.

The cost of a case of LDA has recently been estimated at up to £650. This comprises costs of labour, medicines, surgery, loss

of milk, reduced fertility and increased risks of death and culling.

"Farms where the incidence of DAs is greater than 3% are probably feeding late dry and early lactation cows incorrectly. The aim must be to encourage high dry matter intakes through a well-formulated diet and to provide plenty of feed access while minimising changes to the diet," Mr May continues.

"Although there are numerous causes, rumen acidosis is a risk factor associated with higher levels of DAs and the incidence of acidosis can be affected by diet sorting."

According to Tom Hough, technical manager with NWF Agriculture, diet sorting is still a big issue on UK dairy farms.

"Dairy cows need a blend of different particle sizes in the diet, mixed to ensure a consistent flow to the rumen. A well-operated mixer wagon is a very effective way to deliver diets and optimise intakes. In contrast, a poorly-operated machine or formulated diet can predispose cows to acidosis and LDAs.

"In a recent trial carried out by Frank Wright Trouw Nutrition International, only 22% of diets were mixed well, resulting in a consistently presented feed which cows were unable to sort at the feed passage. This means that

four out of five diets were poorly presented.

"A further 22% of rations were sorted after they had been put out, with cows separating out the fine materials, usually those containing high starch, in preference to forages. The consequence is a much greater risk of acidosis.

"The overriding conclusion is that farmers would benefit from paying more attention to the way the diet is presented to the cows. They should avoid overloading the diet mixer as this can reduce the effectiveness of mixing. The mixer should also be loaded in an order that promotes the most comprehensive mixing.

"The physical form of the ingredients can also affect mixer effectiveness. If forage chop length is too long, the mix will be more prone to sorting. The physical form of straights can also have an impact. Pellets can be more easily sorted than finer meals in some diets, particularly those which have a proportion of longer chopped forage or higher DM content."

Mr Hough believes diet mixing is a contributory factor in the higher incidence of LDAs in fresh calved cows at grazing this year. "Where DAs occur in the first nine days of lactation, the problem is probably related to dry cow feeding. DAs happening later on will

reflect lactation management."

A TMR produced to supplement grazing is by definition only a partial TMR and will have a far lower fibre content than a full winter TMR. This can cause significant problems with diet sorting.

According to Mr Hough, the problems associated with diet sorting and acidosis can significantly affect a cow's lifetime profit by reducing performance. To minimise the effect of diet sorting and to encourage more even intakes, he recommends:

- Sieving the diet to assess the effectiveness of mixing.
- Making the diet as homogenised as possible to make it more difficult for cows to sort the ration.
- Including chopped rather than long straw as this will mix better. It will also help form the rumen mat which is difficult to achieve with high grass diets.
- Including molasses in the diet to coat the forage portion.
- Including a rumen buffer to help stabilise rumen pH and improve fibre digestion.
- Letting all the cows on to the TMR at the same time rather than one by one after milking. If cows are allowed to drift back to the feed, the first ones get to the diet sooner. If the diet is not mixed correctly, these cows can sort out the concentrate, leaving the fibre or long chop material and increasing the risk of acidosis.

Bill May concludes: "Paying more attention to diet presentation can help improve milk yield and reduce the risk of LDAs. With LDAs the cost of rectifying the problem is the tip of the iceberg. The real cost is a reduction in lactation performance and a delay in rebreeding."



Bill May.



Tom Hough.

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