

Heifer rearing and Johne's disease

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Off-farm or contract rearing of heifers can contribute to controlling Johne's disease, although that is obviously not its primary purpose.

Crucial to reducing spread of infection and consequent cases in future generations is protecting replacement animals from exposure to dung from infected adults (during housing, on pasture and from slurry). This will have most effect when they are young and most susceptible to infection, especially for herds that are known to be infected with Johne's disease, or for which infection status is unknown.

The most effective intervention you can make to control spread of Johne's disease through heifer rearing is to remove heifers to the contract rearer before they are put out to pasture on the home farm, especially if the herd is infected. If the heifer calves must be grazed prior to being sent to rearing, wean them onto pastures that have not recently, and preferably for the previous 12 months, been grazed by adult cattle or spread with slurry from adult cattle.

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IRISH JOHNE'S CONTROL PROGRAMME

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Johne's Control

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Be aware of the risk of exposure to Johne's disease from potentially contaminated dung on the contract rearing farm. This will be primarily if there is adult cattle present, or if pasture is spread with slurry from adult cattle. Grazing of your replacements should be arranged so that there is an interval since adult grazing or spreading slurry, preferably of 12 months but if that is not attainable then the longer the better, before the calves go in to graze the paddock.

Sharing of pastures and sheds with heifers from other farms also carries risk in terms of biosecurity and Johne's disease and should be avoided. However, if unavoidable the risk from other heifers of the same age is reasonably low, because young animals that are well-nourished and stress-free are unlikely to be shedding and contaminating the local environment. Spreading of Johne's disease from dairy cows typically occurs after the second calving or later, and very rarely before the first calving.

Heifers will gradually acquire some age-related resistance against infection with Johne's disease, so risk mitigation at rearing is more important during the first months, and becomes less critical as the animal's age attains and exceeds 12 months.

Similarly, replacement heifers at the contract rearer should be housed over winter in pens that are isolated from animals of other herds, and good pen hygiene should be maintained throughout. Pens should be regularly cleaned and bedding replaced to minimise exposure to dung, especially if isolation from other herds is not possible. Control drainage to prevent the flow of slurry into the yearling pens.

When out grazing make sure all boundary fences are secure to avoid animals straying and mixing with your heifers.

Before signing your contract you should discuss your biosecurity concerns for your heifers with your contract rearer, so you each have a common understanding of expectations and responsibilities, such as sharing of grazing areas, health monitoring and preventive treatments, and response to ill-health. Talk to your veterinary practitioner and perhaps include them in any discussions with the contract rearer.

Another benefit of contract rearing heifers to Johne's control is that it frees up time on-farm to concentrate on other activities including, for those who are registered in the Johne's programme, implementation of the agreed recommendations of the funded veterinary risk assessment and management plan (VRAMP).

No single or simple action will prevent or control Johne's disease, because it is so insidious. However, a planned and consistent approach in collaboration with your veterinary practitioner will be effective at reducing the spread and impacts of Johne's disease and other calf and cow conditions.