

# Are you winter-ready?

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**A**ll of a sudden August is upon us and as workload eases at this time of year, it is a good opportunity to review your housing for the winter period and to carry out any necessary repairs or perhaps plan for greater stock numbers. The importance of having adequate housing and space to ensure healthy animals during the winter period cannot be overemphasised. Cows are also more productive when they have adequate space, so while it may seem expensive to increase housing capacity, in the long term it will save you money. Here are some key questions to ask yourself, to determine what maintenance needs to be done while time allows.

## Are your sheds clean before housing?

At this time of year, the most important task is the cleaning and disinfection of the sheds to reduce contamination and any possible carry over of environmental contamination from the previous winter. This reduces environmental contamination for all disease sources. The use of approved disinfectants from [DAFM Approved Disinfectant List](#) is important. Ensure that all organic matter (dried out manure, discharges, soil etc) is removed by scraping or power washing before applying disinfectant, as organic matter can make many disinfectants ineffective. Allow maximum contact time to ensure that the disinfectant works.





## Are your cows comfortable during housing?

A cow should be able to lie up to 12-14 hours of the day, but cubicle discomfort can reduce lying time to below 9 hours. The use of a cow mat greatly improves the cow comfort and the length of time they will lie in the cubicle. The mat condition should be checked to ensure that the surface is not breaking down which can make the cubicle difficult to clean and leads to a build-up of dirt and bacteria. Cubicle design is also important; they should be 7.5-8' long and 4' wide, depending on the size of cow. There needs to be a 4' forward lunging space in front of the cubicle to allow cows to lunge forward when getting up, and for neck extension to ruminate. The distance from brisket board to kerb and the height and location of the neck rail are extremely important. These measurements vary depending on cow type so it is important to discuss in more detail with your advisor or veterinary practitioner as they can often be easily adjusted.

## How many cubicles are needed?

We must account for normal cow behaviour, when making sure that every cow has a place to lie comfortably. Hence there should be 110 cubicles for every 100 cows.



## Feeding space?

Adequate feeding space and easy access to clean water are essential to avoid competition between cows and build-up of dung in the passageways, as cows queue to feed or drink.

## Is there adequate ventilation?

Good ventilation and natural light in the dry cow house provides a dry atmosphere, reducing the chance of bacteria surviving and multiplying in the shed. Do repairs need to be made to existing roofs?

The [Winter Housing Checklist](#) available on the AHI website is a very useful reference to look at cow hygiene as well as housing and management practices on your farm. It is really important to maintain a clean, dry and comfortable environment for cows during the entire dry period no matter what type of housing you have.

## Don't forget about Summer Mastitis!

Autumn calving herds especially, need to be aware of the risk of summer mastitis at this time of year. Summer mastitis occurs in the non-lactating udder. It is a serious condition and can be fatal if not treated promptly. Flies are considered central to its transmission and hence the association with summer. Damage to the teat, trauma and irritation of the udder are also important risk factors.

## Prevention measures

The importance of having good fly control measures in place cannot be over-emphasised. Flies should be controlled from early in the fly season and depending on the product used it may need to be repeated regularly, as often as every 2 weeks during the summer season. Also, the application of fly repellents around the udder area, such as traditional Stockholm tar and teat spray may help reduce the number of flies attracted to the cow's udder. Avoid grazing cows or in-calf heifers in fields that are near rivers or marshy areas or where there is a high density of trees or hedges, where flies tend to populate. More exposed pastures are preferable, as high winds inhibit fly activity. Observing and checking animals and teats on a regular basis is essential, as the earlier the mastitis is detected the better the prognosis. Good teat condition will reduce the risk of infection. Good hygiene at drying off and the use of teat sealers are essential control measures to minimise disease.