

Preparing for drying off the first job of 2024 and not the last job of 2023!

Michelle McGrath, CellCheck Assistant Programme Manager

Good preparation is key to a successful drying off event. Planning should begin at least a month before you aim to start drying off. As you are aware, the new Veterinary Medicine Regulations came into effect in January 2022, meaning that farmers need to move away from 'blanket dry cow' therapy and adopt 'selective drying off strategies', which involve a more targeted use of antibiotic treatments. Only cows with evidence of infection are treated with antibiotics at drying off. Internal teat sealer should be used in the remainder of the herd as one of the measures to prevent new infections. However, to be able to do this successfully there are some key management and hygiene practices that must be in place.

Advance preparation that needs to be done before drying off:

- Milk recording within a month of drying off to identify cows with a high SCC, (followed by another recording in early 2024 to evaluate the success of the dry period).
- Collect sterile samples from a selection of high SCC cows, including old, young, recently infected and chronic cows, to get a profile of the type of bacteria that are in the herd, and which antibiotics they are susceptible to.
- Arrange a consult with your vet to discuss the drying off strategy.
- Review expected calving dates, to ensure an adequate dry period is achieved (minimum 6-8 weeks, longer in young or thin cows).
- Management of production levels; where cows are yielding greater than 12 L /day in the week before planned drying off, reduce feed intake, but not water access.
- Clip cows' tails and rear udders to ensure better hygiene.
- **Avoid** skipping milkings in the days leading up to drying off- meaning cows should be dried off abruptly.

We need to remember that a selective drying off strategy is not without risk and is not something to embark on without seeking professional support. It is important that time is put aside to discuss records and the drying off procedure with your advisor and vet. As part of the Targeted Advisory Service on Animal Health (TASAH) funded through the Rural Development Plan 2014-2020, a free Dry Cow Consult, is available for eligible farmers. The purpose of the TASAH Dry Cow Consult is to enable farmers to engage with their veterinary practitioner to develop farm-specific selective dry cow strategies, where appropriate. Applications are currently open for the TASAH Dry Cow Consult and details are available on the Animal Health Ireland website: www.animalhealthireland.ie. To be eligible, the farmer must meet the following criteria:

- Average bulk milk tank SCC for the last 12 months is less than 200,000 cells/mL.
- At least 4 whole herd milk recordings in the last 12 months.

It is also time to start gathering the necessary equipment and arranging extra help that you will need at the time of drying off, as it can be a slow and tedious job. Drying off should be done separately and **not** done during milking. As the goal is to dry off the last cow as well as you did the first cow, then no more than 20 cows per person should be done on one day. Drying off cows should be avoided when the farmer is tired, hungry, or stressed. The necessary equipment needed includes:

- A clean apron.
- Head torch.
- Disposable gloves.
- Teat wipes or cotton balls and surgical spirits.
- Marker and recording notebook.
- And intramammary tubes, including teat sealers.

The importance of good hygiene cannot be over emphasised. Having a system in place for cleaning, sterilising teats and tubing and repeating for each cow is also an important part of the routine and teats should be disinfected after administering tubes. Cleaning the parlour between batches helps to maintain a clean environment.

Following drying off, keep the cows standing for a minimum of thirty minutes in a clean environment, like a nearby dry field or clean cubicles. The importance of good hygiene during the dry period should not be forgotten. Cows are susceptible to new infections particularly in the early dry period before their teats have sealed and in the 2 weeks prior to calving. Cows need to be monitored closely during these times because if mastitis is not identified promptly the cow can become very sick, very quickly.