

IMPROVING SUSTAINABILITY

How reducing herd lameness can help

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What is sustainability?

Sustainability means meeting the needs of current generations without compromising the needs of future generations, while ensuring a balance between economic growth, environmental care and social well-being. An increased focus on the environmental and welfare implications of modern agriculture means the sustainability of agricultural practices is currently under intense scrutiny everywhere. It is vital that dairy farming is carried out in a sustainable manner so that it can continue into the future. Reducing herd lameness is one way that farmers can improve the sustainability of their farms, and the dairy industry in general.

How can reducing lameness improve environmental sustainability?

Lameness impacts environmental sustainability in a number of ways. Lamé cows are less productive – they produce less milk, have lower fertility and are more likely to be culled earlier. On the other hand, cows that do not become lame are more productive and more likely to stay in the herd for longer. Increasing the productive lifespan of the dairy cow decreases the environmental footprint of milk production because fewer replacement heifers are needed, resulting in reduced greenhouse gas emissions per litre of milk. Lameness is also one of the top reasons for antimicrobial use in dairy cows. So, reducing lameness in your herd is one way to reduce antimicrobial use on your farm, as well as decreasing your greenhouse gas emissions.

How can reducing lameness improve social sustainability?

Lameness reduces cow welfare because it is a painful condition, causes stress and also impedes the ability of the cow to perform her normal behaviours. Society is becoming increasingly concerned about animal welfare; the proportion of Irish people who believe the welfare of farmed animals should be better protected than it is now increased by 22% from 2006 to 80% in 2016 (European Commission, 2016). By reducing lameness in your herd, you can improve the wellbeing of your cows and thereby directly improve the social sustainability of your farm and the dairy industry in general.

How can reducing lameness improve economic sustainability?

Lameness is a costly disease. It reduces milk production, and affects reproductive performance, increasing the calving interval, calving to conception interval and the number of services per conception. Further costs include the direct cost of treatment, discarding of milk due to antibiotics, and increased labour costs. Recent research estimated that the annual net profit could be as much as €16,500 higher for herds with optimal mobility scores (where 90% of the cows had a score of 0; AHDB lameness score) compared to a herd with very poor mobility scores (90% of cows had a score ≥ 1). By reducing lameness in your herd, you can increase the productivity of your cows and thereby the economic sustainability of your farm.



Take Home Message!
Reducing lameness improves cow welfare, helps the environment,
and increases farm profits!



<https://animalhealthireland.ie/programmes/hoof-healthcheck/>