FriarsMoor Livestock Health

Newsletter May 2025

Dry cow nutrition and transition related diseases

By Jade Mowlem BVMSci MRCVS

The close-up dry period is a critical period in the last 3 weeks before calving to prevent transition related diseases and ensure a successful lactation. It is very tempting now we have had some nice weather, to chuck the dry cows out to grass and leave them there until calving!

Over the past year, as a practice we sold the following drugs that are related to transition related diseases:
- 538 tubes of Metricure (to treat endometritis)
- 225L of propylene glycol (to treat ketosis)
- 708 bottles of Calcibel (to treat milk fever)

In this article, I am going to discuss some options for dry cow diets that may help to reduce transition related diseases.
The target calcium level in a dry cow diet is 30g/head/day. To put this into context, the average calcium content of grass silage is 8-10g/kg DM. If a cow eats 12kg of forage DM a day, she will consume 120g of calcium. Excess calcium will stop a cow from mobilising it from her bones when she needs it at calving. Heavily fertilised grass (high in potassium) will also reduce calcium mobilisation.

So, what are some options?

Goldilocks diet
- The term 'Goldilocks' is used as it provides just the right amount of nutrition – requirements are met but not exceeded when the diet is fed ad-lib.
- A diet low in energy and high in low quality forage (such as straw) to achieve good rumen fill
- Straw must be chopped to 2cm for palatability
- Can be fed for the entire dry cow period
- No grass silage used
- Should contain >1.2kg of metabolisable protein, provided by a concentrate such as soya
- Good at preventing milk fever and ketosis

DCAB diet
- Balances minerals in diet to create slightly acidic conditions in the blood to allow calcium mobilisation from the bones
- Magnesium chloride flakes are used as an anionic salt
- This diet is harder to monitor – blood acidity can be measured by testing urine pH
- Used in higher yielding herds

Calcium binders
- Bind excessive calcium in the diet to reduce milk fever
- Used where a high amount of silage is fed in the diet
- Usually approximately 500g zeolite/head/day
- Can feed alongside a fairly normal diet
- Expensive
- Does not reduce other transition related diseases well, such as ketosis
- May be useful in smaller AYR calving herds

Standing hay for grazing herds
-Leave fields to grow for >2 months and then strip graze to provide a high fibre, low energy diet
-Eat 8-10kg DM/day
-High yielding cows will need supplementing with dry cow rolls
-Cheapest diet
-Works well for outdoor systems, but weather can play a big part in this
-Works well for autumn block calving herds

Forage and dry cow rolls
-Forage such as haylage (25-30kg fresh weight) and dry cow nuts (2-3kg/head/day)
-Simple
-Dry cow nuts provide protein and energy
-Works well with smaller groups

Standing Hay

Mag flakes

Zeolite

Goldilocks Diet

If you think you'd benefit from a transition review, give the practice a call.

DATES FOR YOUR DIARY

21 MAY

WEC COURSE

An introduction into worm egg counting – this course is designed for farmers wanting to learn how to do their own worm egg counting on farm. It is a hands-on course so that you will become familiar with the technique. You will learn how to recognise different worm eggs and cocci oocysts, using equipment that will be suitable for a farm set up.

27 MAY

KIDS LAMBING & CALVING COURSE

An introduction into lambing and calving for aspiring young famers and vets out there!

Suitable for 12-16 year olds.

17 JUNE

OPTIMISING GROWTH OF BEEF CATTLE AT GRASS

Join us for a farm walk at Cranborne Grazing, by kind permission of Tom and Karolina Mitchell. The meeting will be facilitated by Luppo Diepenbroek.

Open to all farmers with beef suckler or beef x dairy animals at grass.

LEVEL 2 CALF REARING COURSE – JULY 2025

LEVEL 1 CALF REARING COURSE – AUGUST 2025

DATES AND VENUE TBC

HEIFFER EFFICIENCY

Heifer efficiency is the focus of the Friars Moor Youngstock Group this year...

How many of your heifers born make it to 2nd lactation? Stillbirths and losses to weaning account for approximately half of UK losses birth to 1st calving, with the remainder made up of failing to conceive and mortality/culls.

Can gains be made on your farm to improve profitability and sustainability? The first step is to look at your data. We looked at the number of heifers born alive that made it to 2nd lactation across 2018-2022 in the group.

	Born alive that calve in for 1st lactation	Born alive that calve in for 2nd lactation
UK data	78%	65%
FMLH Youngstock Group	85%	76%

Wathes et al., 2008, Sherwin et al., 2016, Stanton et al., 2012

Our meetings are going to focus on each phase of heifer rearing this year using the data set we have from our youngstock service to benchmark performance.

Weaning to Service – Tuesday 10th June 11-2pm at Alford Fields Farm by kind permission of Catherine Pickford and Nathan Crocker

Birth to weaning – Wednesday 17th September at Barbers Youngstock Unit in collaboration with Trouw and Shepton Youngstock Group. Timings TBC.

Service to Calving – Autumn 2025 pub

Calving to 2nd lactation – Winter 2025 on farm/village hall.

Meetings are included in our youngstock membership, but are open to all clients. Meeting fees for non-members are £25/person. If any farms would like to join this programme and be part of the data set – please speak to Lucy or Becca about joining the youngstock group.

FIELD TO FOOD LEARNING DAY

Becca and Martha spoke to lots of children at the recent Field to Food learning day held at the Royal Bath & West Pavillion. The Field to Food Learning Day plays a vital part in educating and informing youngsters where their food comes from, and the hard work involved to provide it.

TO REGISTER YOUR INTEREST FOR UPCOMING MEETINGS PLEASE CALL THE FARM OFFICE ON 01258 472314

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