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## Down Cow Management

There are many reasons why a cow may become a down cow other than milk fever and pregnancy toxaemia, but the common theme is that they are all very serious! Cows only stay down if they can't help it.

Causes we commonly find include: a variety of nerve paralyses, pneumonia, peritonitis, metritis, twisted uterus, lumbosacral dislocation, rotten twin left inside, septicaemia, salmonella, anaemia, hepatitis, mastitis, RDA, intussusceptions, etc.

Regardless of the reason for the cow initially 'going down', cows are not designed to be down for a long period of time, especially on hard surfaces. After a cow is down for more than 6 hours, muscle and nerve damage in the leg on which the animal is lying can become the main reason why the cow is unable to stand, even if the first reason, such as milk fever, has been successfully treated.

This progression of the condition is called 'downer cow syndrome'.

Treatment of the down cow includes:

- Early identification and treatment of the primary reason for the cow going down. If it turns out to be something other than an uncomplicated milk fever, the earlier we can see the cow, the more effective we can be in working out a treatment plan with you.
- Treatment with an anti-inflammatory such as Ketoprofen or Metacam to minimize muscle and nerve injury (especially within 24 hours of going down).
- Moving the cow to an area that has soft ground underneath it such as sand or deep bedding straw that is 20+cm deep.
- Offering her protection from the elements by placing her in a protected shed or putting large hay bales around her. Also, a horse blanket at night can help.
- Providing water and a variety of feed (grain, hay and fresh grass).
- Rolling the cow from side to side to prevent the cow favoring one leg and causing pressure damage to the leg under her (up to 6 times a day if possible).
- Supervised lifting 1-2 times per day for 20 minutes at a time with a sling or hip clamps plus a chest strap to prevent undue pressure on her pelvis and back. This takes the pressure off her legs. If the cow makes no effort to take some of her weight on her own feet, she should be let down. If the cow can take her own weight she can be released from the clamps.



- Down cows may need to be milked and they should be regularly checked for mastitis.
- Other therapies include active physiotherapy and massage (bending and stretching the limbs to improve blood flow) and acupuncture.

It is hard work and only rewarding if the cow gets up! A question we often get is 'How long do I persist?'. Prognosis for these animals can be difficult to determine - although blood tests may help. Some factors that are considered to indicate a poor prognosis include:

- Not wanting to eat or drink and acting depressed
- If the cow has done the splits with one or both hindlimbs
- If the cow is unable to sit up i.e. can only lie flat out
- If the cow attempts to rise using the front legs only
- If the cow has been down on concrete for more than a few hours
- The cow has not and will not attempt to rise despite repeated encouragement and lifting
- The cow's hindlimbs are extended forward (hooves are touching her elbows) or the cow's hindlimbs are extended behind her (frog leg)
- No sensation is present in the cow's limbs
- During calving the calf was stuck at the hips for a prolonged period.

Length of treatment needs to be decided on an individual animal and farm basis. We need to consider the disease causing the cow to be down, the welfare of the animal and available labour to provide adequate nursing care.

If treatment of a down cow is taking time to the detriment of other animals or people and her prognosis is poor, she should be euthanised sooner rather than later.

If, however there is enough man power to give good care and she is showing few or none of the above signs, then it is good to give her a chance!

Some conditions, such as middle grade femoral nerve paralysis, take time (even 2 weeks) to come good. With others, like milk fever, they should be up within an hour or there is something else going on.

The sooner a down cow is seen and her problem is diagnosed, the sooner we can provide relief either by treatment or euthanasia.