

Teagasc Notes for week ending Friday 19th November 2021

Drying off cows in batches is in full swing on most farms. Heifers and thin cows need to be dry for 12 weeks to give them a break, allow them to gain body condition and replenish the mammary tissue in the udder. Mature cows should be dry for 8 weeks to gain or maintain body condition and to replenish mammary tissue. Selective Dry Cow Therapy will be compulsory from the 28th January 2022 under European legislation. This means that dairy farmers will no longer be allowed to administer dry cow tubes to all quarters of all cows in the herd (blanket dry cow therapy) at drying off.

Up to now, dry cow antibiotics were used for both treatment of udder infections but also to prevent new infection. The second part is essentially the change that the EU legislation requires. Farmers will no longer be able to carry out preventative treatment for potential infections. Only cows that have a history of mastitis in the previous lactation can receive an antibiotic tube in the infected quarter. Evidence of infection in the form of milk recording data or culture and sensitivity analysis will be required.

Therefore, healthy cows with somatic cell counts of <200,000 that have not had mastitis will only receive a teat sealer. This will automatically reduce the amount of antibiotics used on dairy farms.

Many farmers have already prepared themselves for this change and are practicing selective dry cow therapy in the last year or so. For those that have not yet changed their practices, there are a few key steps that need to be put in place to prepare yourself for selective dry off in 2022: Consult your vet at all stages of the transition; Sign up for milk recording 4-6 times per year in 2022. This is critical to give you data to track mastitis cases during the year and also to identify the cows that will need an antibiotic at dry off.

Good hygiene practices are essential at drying off so as not to introduce infection to cows during the drying off process. This is especially true with selective dry cow where you are putting a sealer in the healthy cows. The following steps should be followed: Identify the cows to be dried off with sealer only and draft following milking; Wash out the parlour and get organised (gloves, methylated spirits, cotton wool, teat sealers, a table, a bucket for rubbish, eat something?). Take your time and don't try to dry too many cows in one day. Target small numbers (6-8 cows) at a time in the parlour to minimise dunging and contamination of the working environment. Thoroughly clean the teats, seal, teat spray and mark well to identify that cow has been dried. Stand the cows in a clean yard for a period to allow teats to close. Move to a paddock or clean dry cubicles and maintain high standard of cubicle hygiene in general but in particular in the 2 weeks after dry off and again in the 2 weeks prior to calving. The process may sound like a lot of work, however, the same process should be used if applying antibiotic tubes.

Remember that it will take at least 5 minutes per cow and possibly longer to do the process correctly, so that is 12 cows per hour. The average herd size in Ireland is close to 90 cows so that means that the drying off process is going to take over 7.5 hours to complete! Therefore, it is important to allow sufficient time for the process.