

Replacement Heifer Mastitis

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Dairy heifers are termed the future of the herd but many times they are overlooked when thinking about mastitis. Mastitis in heifers can be costly. These costs include: premature culling, labor, lost production, blind quarters, drugs costs and wasted milk from withdrawals. Nothing is worse than looking down after confirming a pregnancy in a replacement heifer and seeing a swollen or lopsided quarter. It is almost inevitable that this will end up as a case of mastitis when this animal freshens!

With this in mind I would like to share some tips for preventing mastitis in your replacement heifers:

Housing and Hygiene

Housing your heifers in a clean and dry environment with lots of bedding is critical. This isn't just important as they get close to calving but during all stages of their development. Proper ventilation in your heifer pens will reduce heat stress and help dry out your bedding pack. Preventing overcrowding is key as increased stocking density can negatively affect cow cleanliness. Calving pen hygiene can also be a major risk factor (especially if sick cows are housed in these pens) for heifer mastitis.

Fly Control

Having a fly control program in place is critical in preventing mastitis in your replacement heifers. Horn flies, which are most active during the summer act as the main vector in the transmission of mastitis causing bacteria between heifers. Regular use of approved insecticide pour on's or ear tags are simple yet effective tools to help reduce the fly numbers.

Waste Milk

Feeding un-pasteurized waste milk to heifer calves increases their chances of getting mastitis. While we don't know exactly why this is the case it is something that can be easily avoided. Either pasteurize the milk or feed milk replacer.

Cross sucking

Calves should be monitored for cross sucking, especially those around weaning and when first being introduced to group housing. Weaner rings should be used on any animals that have found to be sucking udders of other heifers.

Good nutrition

Feed your heifers a well balanced diet that helps to limit excessive body condition at calving. Ensure this diet has an adequate level of vitamins and minerals. Proper vitamin E and Selenium supplementation, especially pre freshening and early lactation help boost your heifers immune function. Ensure you have a good close up program for your heifers to avoid subclinical ketosis in your fresh heifers as this can cause immunosuppression further increasing the mastitis risk.

Vaccination

Boost the immune system of your heifers by using gram negative / E.coli vaccines. These vaccines help to reduce the severity of mastitis caused by gram negative bacteria.

A good goal to aim for is to have less than 10% of heifers with clinical mastitis around calving and to aim for less than 10% of heifers with a first test day somatic cell count (SCC) greater than 150,000 cells / ml. If you think you have a heifer mastitis problem on your farm, talk to your herd veterinarian about developing a prevention protocol that works for you. We have too much time and money invested in our heifers to spend time treating cases of mastitis that could have easily been prevented.