DAIRY HERD HEALTH & PRODUCTIVITY SERVICE

Newsletter 2018, Q2 May 2018

Poor fertility in summer calvers

With some decent weather allegedly around the corner, it looks as if spring has finally arrived for most in the UK. Given the long winter and shortage in winter forage stocks, it cannot come quickly enough for most.

However turnout can bring its own problems. Do you struggle to get cows back in calf when they are outside at grass? Do conception rates drop at turnout? Do your summer calvers this year end up being autumn calvers next year?

Whilst there are a variety of reasons why fertility might drop at turnout, experience is that cows often struggle with excessive negative energy balance (NEB) and body condition score (BCS) loss at grass. Indeed DHHPS blood testing results show that cows at grass are associated with an increased risk of NEB (shown as high BHB and/or NEFA results), and we see more issues with NEB in the summer months compared to the winter housing period.

Excellent quality grazed grass is capable of sustaining milk yields of 20 - 25 litres a day (based on 16 kg DM intake of grazed grass at 11.5 MJ/kg DM). However grassland and grazing management need to be excellent to achieve these sorts of intakes of good quality grazed grass. If they are not, the cows will start to struggle. They may not show you this in terms of reduced milk yields, but you may see this when it comes to getting them back in calf. Prolonged time to come back in heat after calving? High levels of cystic ovarian disease? Disappointing conception rates? These are all potential effects of excessive NEB on fertility that can last for 2 – 3 months after the issues have resolved.

Keys to preventing such issues affecting fertility:

- Manage grazed grass well to keep plenty of good quality grass in front of cows at all times. Use a sward stick or plate meter to objectively measure grazing availability.
- Be realistic about what can be achieved from grazed grass, especially by high yielding cows in early lactation. Freshly calved cows giving over 40 litres of milk are always going to struggle….
- Parlour cake is the easiest way of supplementing cows at grass, but intakes are limited to 6 – 8 kg a day.
- Buffer feeding with high quality forages such as maize silage or wholecrop provides a good balance to grazed grass. However intakes are key to maximise grazing and energy intakes. DHHPS experience is that restricting cows with access to buffer only is critical to intakes.
- Monitor cows to keep a close eye on energy balance: body condition scoring cows at calving and at a month calved can be a cheap and easy way of checking on BCS loss. However by the time cows get too thin, the damage will already have been done.
- Blood testing cows in late pregnancy and early lactation enables a more rapid assessment of energy balance, giving time to nip problems in the bud quickly. “Ask the cows” what they think of summer grazing before it is too late.

Dairy Herd Health and Productivity Service, Division of Veterinary Clinical Sciences, Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies, University of Edinburgh, EBVC, Easter Bush, Roslin, Midlothian EH25 9RG
The University of Edinburgh is a charitable body, registered in Scotland, with registration number SC005336
Tel: 0131 651 7474 Fax: 0131 651 7473 DHHPS@ed.ac.uk www.ed.ac.uk/vet/dhhps

DHHPS prices

Having held our annual DHHPS membership prices in 2017, unfortunately we have had to make some increases in April 2018. Annual membership now costs £650 per year, and a "one off" test costs £330 for 17 cows.

Ewe and suckler body condition

Tight forage stocks and the long winter have taken their toll on everyone, and we have seen a number of beef and sheep metabolic profiles through the DHHPS this spring where a significant proportion of animals have been thin and struggling with both energy and protein.

Harsh late autumn and winter grazing, combined with liver fluke burdens and many conserved forages being low in energy and protein have resulted in more animals than usual (particularly ewes) going into late pregnancy with limited body fat reserves.

Unfortunately we have seen a number of twin lamb disease outbreaks where silage has analysed at under 9.5 MJ/kg DM, making it impossible for these animals to eat enough to meet their energy requirements.

In suckler cows, over 1 in 3 of the animals we have profiled have been mobilising body fat reserves at an excessive rate in the run up to calving, whilst nearly 2/3 of the cows were struggling to achieve their daily requirements of Effective Rumen Degradable Protein (ERDP).

Hopefully grass growth will pick up quickly, but with a cold March, many herds and flocks are being forced to turn out onto sparse paddocks. Stock are therefore at risk of continuing to struggle with energy balance and body condition after calving and lambing. For sucklers, this could be the difference between successfully conceiving when the bulls are turned out, with studies showing that only 61% of cows in body condition score 2.0 were cycling by 60 days calved. For some ewes, it could be the difference between life and death.

We rarely think about nutrition once suckler cows and ewes are turned out, but a ewe nursing two lambs will need approximately 30 MJ, and so must achieve intakes of around 2.5 kg DM/head/day of good quality spring grass if they are to meet their needs. Monitoring body condition and paddock Dry Matter cover will be particularly important this spring, to ensure that animals are appropriately supplemented if they are still losing condition or have insufficient DM cover in front of them.

Thin animals are also less efficient at controlling parasite burdens and hence worm egg output onto spring pasture may be higher than previous years. If not already doing so, it would certainly be worth speaking with your vet about monitoring worm burdens in the run up to the June/July peak.

Looking forward to next year, we cannot stress the importance of getting forages analysed well before housing. Many of the problems we have seen this year could have been avoided if action was taken on the basis of forage analysis results to ensure that where necessary:

- Supplementary feeding was started earlier
- Additional protein was purchased
- Better quality forages (in extreme cases) were sourced in good time for the highest risk animals e.g. triplet bearing ewes

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