Transition Management Essential for Maximum Productivity

Transition management refers to the period three weeks prior to calving, and is arguably the most important time in a dairy cow's annual cycle.

At this time, the cow and rumen are preparing for the change from a 'dry' to a 'lactating' state. Good transition management will improve cow performance in a number of ways, but essentially, it sets the appetite ceiling for the ensuing lactation. The cow responds with reduced metabolic issues, increased dry matter intake (DMI) and is more likely to achieve target peak appetite and maximum production.

Aims of transition management

Ultimately, the cow must be able to maximise and maintain appetite and intakes, so the rumen muscles and microflora must be properly prepared to cope with lactation diets.

Rumen adaption requires two to three weeks to prepare the bacteria for the type of feed being offered, hence the need to introduce the lactating diet pre-calving. Healthy cows with good appetites are essential to maximising profits!

The principle aims of a good transition diet

- Eliminate all preventable primary and secondary metabolic diseases
- Optimise the immune system to prevent infectious disease
- Increase DMI to improve nutrient intake
- Trouble-free calving to ensure a healthy calf and cow
- Maximise DMI during lactation and minimise weight loss

Transition diets

- Fully feed the springing dairy cow. Feed intake before calving (total dry period) is directly related to feed intake after calving. Underfed dry and springing cows will never eat to maximum capacity after calving. Do not feed calcium or salt to transition cows, unless advised by a nutritionist or veterinarian.

- Prepare the rumen for milking type feeds after calving. If a starchy feed is fed after, but not before calving, this sudden change in diet will reduce appetite and production in early lactation while the rumen adapts to the new feed.

- Provide a very palatable, high-energy mix. Cows reduce appetite before calving as a result of the size of the pregnant uterus pushing on the rumen, as well as hormonal changes. Diet nutrient density should be increased to maximise nutrients eaten per bite. Molasses is an excellent high energy dense feed that helps encourage cows to eat during this period and doesn't take up space in the rumen.

- Provide a good mix of effective fibre and fermentable energy. Feeding low DCAD (dietary cationic anionic difference) hay or straw will help stretch the rumen plus maintain and encourage rumen capacity and cud chewing before and after calving.

- Feed Rumag300® at 1kg (740mL) per cow per day. This provides magnesium chloride and Rumensin®. Rumensin aids the control of ketosis around calving, and ensures energy is utilised efficiently for late foetal development and colostrum production. The 9g of elemental magnesium will help prevent grass tetany and milk fever.

- Adding BioChlor (a palatable source of anionic salts and amino acids) will positively affect DMI pre and post-calving and reduce the incidence of metabolic disease. Post-calving milk production will increase, and calving to conception interval will be reduced.

In summary

Following these basic recommendations will help minimise the negative effects that clinical and sub-clinical milk fever has on herd productivity and profitability. There are real productive and reproductive gains to be made from adopting a well managed transition diet.

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