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### **Late winter brings potential health problems for Wisconsin dairy cows**

Keeping dairy cows healthy during late winter and early spring can be a big challenge for Wisconsin dairy farmers.

At this time of year, cattle are prone to a complex set of metabolic problems, pneumonia, and other difficulties that can lead to loss of milk production, expensive veterinary bills, and even the death of some animals. The causes are also complex and may include changes in feeding practices as stored forage and inventories diminish and lose quality, the deep cold, and days of confinement in closed barns. Some animals may have put on too much weight at the time of freshening and have trouble metabolizing fat, which can lead to other health problems and lowered resistance to infections.

Ken Bolton, University of Wisconsin-Extension dairy and livestock agent in Jefferson County, suggests dairy farmers consider a whole range of management practices to prevent this complex set of health problems.

“There’s no one cause for these problems,” he said. “Farmers need to check all the bases – from feeding strategies and feed quality to bedding and housing.”

One of the most frequent and serious problems is a displaced abomasum, sometimes called “twisted stomach.”

Randy Shaver, UW-Extension specialist in dairy nutrition explained that the abomasum, which is the fourth of a cow's four stomachs and the only one that has a true digestive function, becomes bloated by gas and shifts inside the abdomen. It can become trapped against other organs. This condition blocks the digestive system and causes severe pain. A cow with this condition will stop eating. It can be fatal if untreated. The only cure is surgery.

“The most likely cause is feed,” Shaver said. “At the end of the winter, especially around the time the weather is starting to warm up a bit, feed may get a little spoiled. Since it doesn’t taste so good, cows will refuse to eat it. Then,

when they get hungry enough, they eat too much. This can cause changes in acidity of the rumen and that can cause gas.”

Another metabolic problem that sometimes occurs in February or March is related to “over conditioning.” Cows that gain too much weight over the winter may develop fatty livers that are less able to metabolize fats. This can cause the cow to stop eating, leading to ketosis and lowered resistance to infections such as mastitis and pneumonia.

Some cows may also develop subacute acidosis if forage supplies get short and the animals get too much concentrate relative to forage in their ration. Cows with subacute rumen acidosis may develop sore feet.

In addition to these metabolic problems, cows are more vulnerable to pneumonia at this time of year. Most cases of pneumonia result from housing problems, Bolton said.

“Sometimes, farmers who have free-stall barns wait a little too long to open side curtains when the weather warms up in the spring. At this time of year, with a lack of ventilation, you get a build up of moisture and gases that contribute to pneumonia.”

While the health problems and causes are complex, Shaver said there are strategies for minimizing problems:

- \* Try to keep feed from getting warm and spoiling. When removing feed from silo, bag or bunker, take plenty of feed from the face, or surface. Feed more often so feed doesn't get hot. You can use preservatives in the total mixed ration to keep feed fresh longer in the feed bunk.
- \* Open up barns before the weather gets warmer. Stale moist air and trapped gases in a tight barn contribute to pneumonia and other respiratory diseases that are more common in the spring. When cows are sick, they go off feed and that can contribute to the metabolic problems.

Anticipate. These health problems happen almost every year, so it's wise to remember it will probably happen again and take any measures you can to keep feed quality up. Monitor temperatures and open up barns in late February and early March when daytime temperatures are above freezing, but nighttime temperatures are below freezing. Keep an eye on the inside walls and roof of naturally ventilated freestall barns. If visible moisture appears, particularly on roof perlins, it's time to open the barn.

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