

## Five tips for better handling facilities

Good handling facilities are essential for ensuring we can thoroughly examine your animal, however they don't need to be fancy or expensive. Some simple changes can make all the difference.

Here are our five tips for creating the best handling facilities on your holding:

### 1. Ensure adequate lighting

Often when we are called out, we have to assess animals in sheds, stables or pigsties, and in many cases these buildings have no indoor lights.

Even on a bright, sunny day some animal houses can still be dark inside, making it difficult to properly assess the animal. Installing lighting in your sheds will make a vet's job much easier.

### 2. Install a hard-standing area

Sometimes – especially with smaller animals – we need to kneel on the floor to carry out our examination, and it's not great if you have to kneel in mud.

Installing an area of hard-standing, whether it's constructed using concrete or road planings, will solve this problem and be beneficial if your vet needs to examine your animal's legs or feet. Hard-standing also allows us to assess your animals' gait if appropriate.

### 3. Catch and pen up your animals before the vet arrives

Pen your animals approximately 30 minutes prior to the vet's arrival.

Make sure the animals' herd or flockmates are with

them to reduce stress and give them access to food and water while they are penned.

Chasing the animals around the field immediately prior to examination will create stress in both the animal and us(!) Stress artificially elevates the animal's heart and respiratory rate, which will affect the assessment of their health state.

### 4. Get your animals used to head collars

A lot of people have head collars for their animals, which can be very helpful – but only if the animal has been trained to wear them and they aren't causing it stress.

When animals are restrained using a head collar and they are stressed, they have a tendency to writhe around, affecting the ability to examine them and their normal parameters.

If you plan to use a head collar to help restrain an animal during a vet visit, we'd recommend training the animal to get them used to wearing it beforehand.

### 5. Ask the vets what to do

If you are not used to handling your animals, or holding onto them, communicate that with your vet and they will gladly help you.

Some vets don't feel comfortable telling people what to do, but if you ask them how to hold your animal, they will be more than happy to show you how.

By following these tips to improve your handling facilities and protocols, the health and wellbeing of everyone involved in a vet visit – the animal, the vet and the owner – will be greatly improved.



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# How data capture systems can help vets and farmers improve livestock health and performance

'If you can measure – you can manage' is the term we find ourselves regularly using with clients when discussing why we should add or increase the amount of health and performance data being collected from their herds. Not only do we want to use insights to help make decisions to improve health but increasingly, data evidence is needed to meet standards such as Red Tractor requirements.

How you collect this data on farm can really vary. It wasn't that long ago we were simply jotting down key figures on paper in a dairy office on farm visits. But nowadays vets and farmers are increasingly using a range of digital tools, apps and online systems for monitoring.

The main benefit of digital systems is that they enable us to remotely identify areas to discuss with our farmers, before deciding if we need to go on farm - helping farmers improve any performance or health issues and in a more cost-effective way.

## What data capture systems are currently available?

In the dairy industry, a system that originally started with spreadsheets inputted with milk readings, sampling and mastitis recordings from herd books is now accessible remotely through online portals such as Cattle Information Service (CIS) or NMR's Herd Companion.

These high-tech systems allow us to download herd data and compile it into an interactive report format that can be presented clearly to you – we tend to use a mix of systems to do this.

Digifarm is a tool available to all VetPartners group vets, enabling them to produce detailed reports based on key performance indicators, such as udder health data. Using Digifarm insights in tandem with other programmes means we can investigate how different herds are affected by the same issues, e.g. rates of mastitis prevalence, and establish benchmarks.

## How can data help improve herd health?

Having data to hand means we can rapidly generate useful reports for each farm, giving a snapshot of performance over the past 12 months, for example, month by month fertility reports or mortality rates. We then analyse the data in more depth, investigating trends or spikes to identify issues that need addressing. The Digifarm data insights provide a clear indicator of where we can work with you to improve herd health management and benchmark KPIs within our client base against all other VetPartners partners across the country.

## What can you use benchmarking insights for?

Using herd data insights to establish health and performance benchmarks enables us to pinpoint high priority areas for improvements.

For example, if a herd has had similar mastitis rates for 20 years, you may be more motivated to invest time or money in making improvements if they learned their rate was far above the average for herds in their area or nationally.

Whether a benchmarking process indicates herd performance is higher, lower or on par with comparison farms, it should be seen as a positive initiative - it's either a chance for you and your teams to pat themselves on the back for taking successful measures or it's a prompt to investigate together how herd health and performance could be improved and set out an action plan.

## How can data collection help manage medicine usage?

On-farm medicine usage, especially antibiotic use, must be recorded very accurately to comply with Red Tractor regulations. We analyse and compare annual medicine purchases for each dairy, giving us a whole-herd picture, which is then benchmarked against the rest of our client base.

## Overall benefits

Although it's important to find a system that suits you, using a digital data capture system can help us assess herd health and performance in a straight-forward and effective way.

These systems are designed to help us work more closely together, sharing data instantly from farm office to vet practice, which not only enables improvement areas to be more quickly identified, but also highlights herd health and welfare improvements to be celebrated.

## Box out – Capturing beef and sheep data insights

To support beef and sheep farmers in monitoring key performance indicator data in the same way as dairy farmers regularly do, the Health Tracker system on Digifarm is now available to farmers to use for their own insights as well as feeding into the veterinary practice.

The Health Tracker data insights help build a more detailed picture of herd or flock health and performance, which goes further than any other system. Not only does it generate reports for official farm assurance assessments, working through the data on-farm offers a great opportunity to discuss and agree new proactive measures.



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# Reviewing mastitis treatment protocols - more than just “which tube?”

To get the best out of mastitis treatments, it's important for farms to regularly review protocols with your vets. Here we look at how to get the best out of a mastitis treatment review.

Prevention should always be the main focus, but there will always be cases that require treatment.

Firstly, it's important to establish exactly what is going on. A few difficult-to-treat cases may give the impression that the current protocol isn't working, but that might not accurately reflect what's really going on, so it's vital to take a look at the data. This is where clinical case records are valuable. Ideally these records will be on a farm software system or collected by the milk recorder, but even if they're just in the farm diary they can be transferred to a spreadsheet for useful analysis. Analysis of basic information (date of mastitis case, cow ID and calving date) can reveal the incidence of new infections, the recurrence rate and whether new infections are predominantly occurring in the dry period or lactation period. You and your vet can then start making some informed decisions. If the data suggests that cure rates could be improved, the checklist review can help drill down into where gains might be made.

## Mastitis detection

Effective mastitis treatment begins with prompt and early detection. Herds that are not fore stripping are likely to miss mild cases of mastitis, where clots are present without heat or swelling in the udder. This may not be too much of a problem in herds with good cure rates and low mastitis incidence, but if cure rates are low, time in the parlour spent fore stripping cows to detect mastitis early will be a sound investment. This will enable you to start treating cases earlier in the course of disease, helping to improve cure rates.

## Insertion technique

The next area to check is tube insertion. Much is, rightly, made of good hygiene practices when administering dry-cow therapy - hygiene is just as important when treating mastitis in milking cows. A full teat disinfection protocol using surgical spirit and cotton wool, just as when administering dry-cow therapy, reduces the risk of introducing new pathogens to the udder when inserting milking cow tubes.

For tubes where there's an option of partial or full removal of the cap to reveal a short or long nozzle, the shorter less invasive nozzle on the tube should be

used to reduce the chance of damaging the keratin lining of the teat.

## Frequency of treatment

How often the treatment should be administered will depend on the tube. Some require twice a day treatment and others just once a day. Using a tube that's licenced for once-a-day treatment means the cow is tubed fewer times for a given treatment duration. This should reduce the chance of introducing infection or damaging the keratin lining of the teat. After infusion, products disperse into the udder tissue, so products licenced for once-a-day use remain at effective levels for 24 hours, even after milking.

## Anti-inflammatory treatment

It's now widely accepted that an important part of an effective mastitis treatment protocol is administering an anti-inflammatory treatment. Mastitis is a painful condition - even mild cases are painful. This is a good enough reason alone to provide pain relief, but there's also evidence to show that using NSAIDs alongside antibiotic treatment can improve cure rates, improve fertility and reduce culling.

## Which tube?

The review will help the farm vet decide the most appropriate tube to prescribe depending on the mastitis pattern on the farm. The vet may prescribe a narrow or broad-spectrum treatment, and will consider the licenced duration of treatment amongst other factors, to ensure cases of mastitis are treated with the most appropriate product for the optimal number of days.

Once the treatment protocol has been revised and agreed by your and your vet, a simple written protocol should be displayed in the parlour for the whole team to be aware of. If you have any questions, or want to review your protocol, please speak to your vet.



**If you would like more information on what we've discussed in this month's newsletter, please speak to any of our farm veterinary team.**

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