

Take steps to keep hooves in good shape at grazing

# Going walkabout

White line disease and sole ulcers are typical hoof problems seen in grazing cattle in Australia and New Zealand – and the UK.

With our grazing season in full swing, what hoof-care lessons can we learn from antipodean producers?

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**W**hen the cows wave goodbye to winter housing and concrete passageways does this mean that producers can wave goodbye to lameness? Not according to Nigel Cook who has studied the impact of a grass-based system on lameness.

The assumption is that cows at grass spend more time lying down and, therefore, there's less wear and tear on their feet. "But while housed dairy cows, fed a TMR, eat for around 4.5 hours per day and rest for an average of 12 hours, the time 'budget' for grazing cows is very different," explains Nigel Cook of the University of Wisconsin-Madison school of veterinary medicine's.

## Lying time

"Research in New Zealand indicates that grazing cattle spend eight hours per day feeding and have shorter daily lying times ranging from between seven and 11 hours in a day. Similar lying times in a housed system would result

in an increased risk of lameness, presumably associated with long periods of time spent standing on concrete passageways."

In grazing herds the potential negative impact of this standing time appears to be reduced because they're standing on pasture. However it is not clear if the reduced lying time is because the cows simply don't have the time available to lie down for longer. Is it because grazing is so time consuming or that grazing cows just simply don't need to rest for as long as housed cows?

A recent study on the incidence of lameness in grazing dairy cattle found that a period on pasture can be used to help lame cattle recover, probably because pasture provides a more comfortable surface for cows to stand on and helps them to recover from hoof and leg injuries.

Although this is true while the cows are

at grass, Dr Cook says that there are implications for summer grazing systems for larger herds where the whole herd is often still milked as one group and standing times in collecting yards may exceed three hours per milking.

## Practical steps

"The collecting yard can compound lameness in several ways. The amount of time spent standing on concrete reduces the amount of time available for rest. "Splitting into smaller groups for milking can help to reduce the amount of time that cows are standing on concrete. Within a herd of mixed parity animals, heifers are likely to be the most affected as they hang around at the back of the yard and tend to be milked last, which means that they're standing around for longer," adds Dr Cook.

In Omagh, in County Tyrone, the Alcorn family has taken steps to take control of lameness as incidence in the 140-cow herd has grown in correlation to herd size. "Six months ago we purchased our own crush. Lameness was impacting on our profitability and during the summer months, when conditions allow, we graze the entire herd – even high yielders. We had to create a way of keeping on top of hoof condition without using a hoof trimmer every time we had a lame cow," says Matthew Alcorn.

"We have fairly wet ground and see our fair share of digital dermatitis, but white line disease is also a factor and the problems do not just disappear during

the summer. We lift the feet on a regular basis in addition to the routine trimming and shaping at drying off. When two or three cows are showing symptoms we look at them immediately, alleviating the problem before it escalates," he adds.

A new Westfalia parlour has reduced the waiting time prior to milking. If cows are standing around for too long, this can cause hoof problems, "Horn can be softened by rough flooring, or damaged by yards where stones are allowed to accumulate on the surface creating trauma," says Dr Cook.

"When this is coupled with poor use of backing gates or excessive use of 'persuasion' to enter the parlour, white line disease can manifest in the front feet.

"If the cows slip sideways and get caught and jammed against the backing gate, white line separation of the outer claw is often the result."

## Making tracks

During the summer months cows will be expected to travel greater distances to and from the milking parlour. This can also increase the risk of lameness, caused by white-line separation and increased wear rates.



Nigel Cook: "The collecting yard can compound a lameness problem"



Matthew Alcorn: "Lameness can affect herd productivity in the summer"

"Not all cracks lead to lameness, but a large number can become severe. Both rear and front feet are prone, but in the rear foot it is the outer claw that's most commonly affected – about 60% of cases. These claws are typically overgrown, are longer than the inside claw and have a shallow claw angle of around 30°," says Dr Cook.

"With this in mind, it's vital that producers take time this grazing season to maintain and repair cow tracks where necessary, to maximise cow flow and minimise traumatic stress on cows."

On an annual basis – and more often if required – Mr Alcorn maintains his cow

tracks, ensuring that the quarry dust surface minimises the stress to the 560 feet that will tread the tracks four times a day during the summer months when, weather permitting, all of the cows will be grazed night and day.

"We recognised that lameness was having an impact on our business. We also realised that this was not a problem restricted to the winter months. Cow mobility is vital during the summer as distances walked can be much greater than in the winter. With our own crush any potential lameness issues are dealt with before they become a huge problem," adds Mr Alcorn. |

*Going the distance: walking to and from the parlour can increase the risk of lameness*

