



Vet Steve Borsberry, from the Solihull-based 608 XLVet Group in the West Midlands, shares some tips on disease prevention and tackling health problems in dairy herds, drawing from his many years of on-farm experience. Here he takes a closer look at the importance of providing dairy cows with plenty of clean and accessible water.

Water is absolutely essential for efficient, healthy and fertile dairy cows

Water, water, everywhere...

Water is often over-looked by producers, who are invariably distracted by ration formulation and other day-to-day management issues. Yet a clean, plentiful and easily accessible water supply is vital to maximise potential milk yields and, in young stock, daily live weight gains. Water 'restriction' will result in reduced performance and severe 'deficiency' and dehydration – which I have seen but rarely in my career. Symptoms include sunken eyes, lethargy and collapse.

That said dairy cows will be extremely vocal if they're thirsty. You'll see them clustered around the water trough, bellowing loudly.

An inadequate supply – be it dirty, inaccessible or simply too little – will prevent a herd from maximising its production potential and will impact on herd health and fertility. Heifer growth rates may also be checked and calving age targets will be more difficult to achieve.

Troughs should be positioned high enough to avoid contamination with faeces and, for young stock, low enough to allow easy access and trouble-free drinking.

Faecal contamination can lead to infection with disease including Salmonella and coccidia, the latter being a particular problem in young stock.

Trough positioning is also important in terms of travelling distance. Cows won't walk a long way for water, such as back to the yard if they're out grazing or to a far flung corner of a field.

Stagnant water

They may turn to other water supplies – dirty puddles or ponds – and that can lead to problems in itself. Ponds in particular can be a reservoir for

diseases such as Leptospirosis, bTB and Johnes' disease.

Johnes' can survive in water for months – trials have shown up to a year – so it's vital to consider your herd's water and drinking facilities as part of any Johnes' control plan.

Ponds and stagnant water can also be contaminated with algae and that too can make cows unwell. And wading into a pond or boggy area to drink may also increase the risk of animals picking up liver fluke.

Another factor that can drive cows to drink from undesirable sources is adding magnesium chloride to the drinking water to help prevent grass staggers. If you're going to do this, make sure there are not other water sources available to the cow. She will choose stagnant standing water over the trough as adding magnesium chloride does alter the taste of the water.

Truly ad-lib

It's vital never to restrict water supply. Water requirements differ depending on the dry matter level of the diet, but typically a cow needs between four and five litres of water for every kilogramme of dry matter eaten. In a large cow that means up to 100 litres of water a day. Trials have shown that a restricted or contaminated supply can reduce milk yield by between one or two litres a day – that soon adds up to a lot of milk for a 100-cow herd.

Remember that scouring cows and calves need extra water – they're more prone to dehydration.

Take time to look at the 'water situation' on your unit. Look at troughs, cleanliness and water availability through a cow's eyes. Make sure she has access to clean and fresh water at all times and that it's conveniently available and keep her away from possibly contaminated sources at all costs. |

