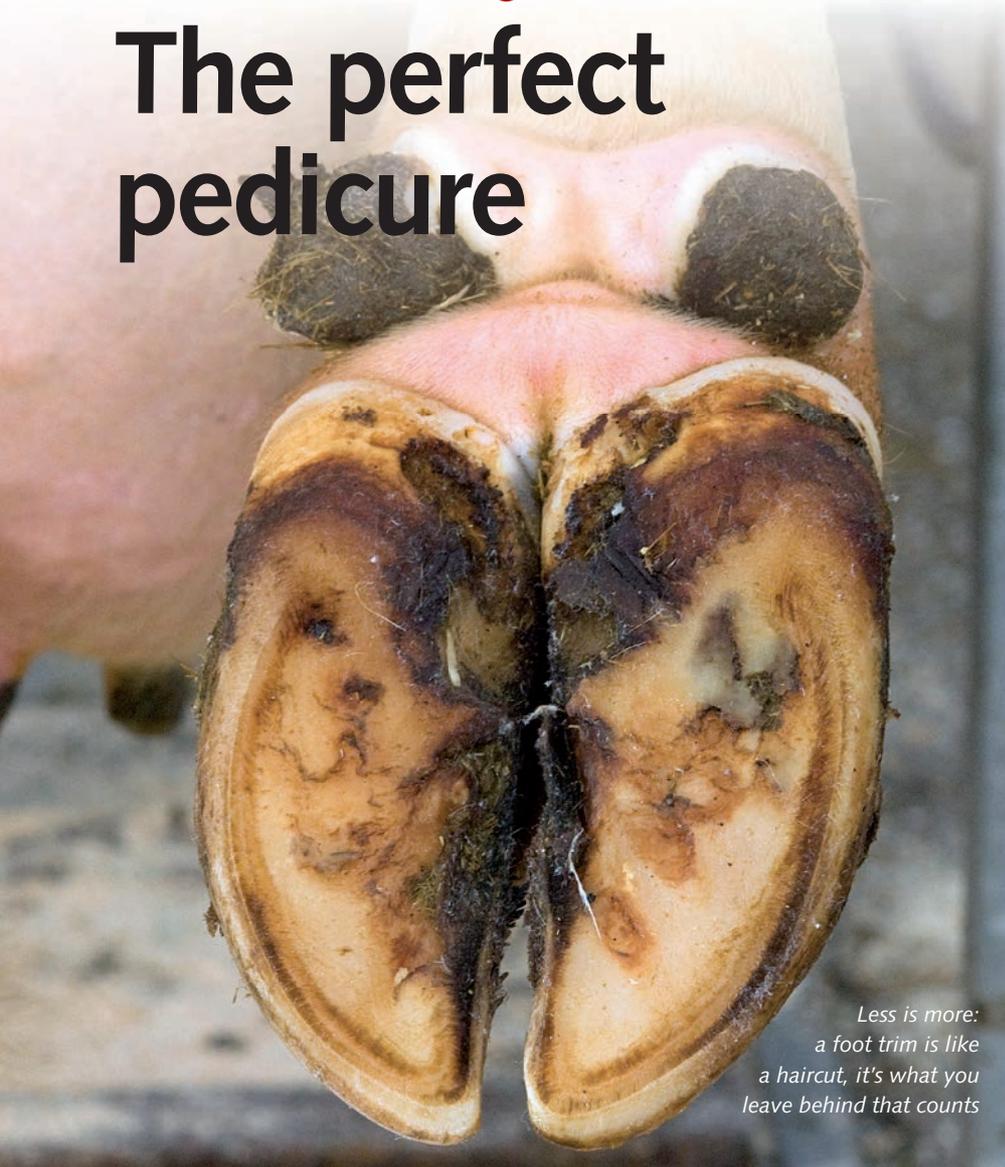


Adopt a 'foot check' approach
to avoid over trimming

The perfect pedicure



*Less is more:
a foot trim is like
a haircut, it's what you
leave behind that counts*

Over enthusiasm – and avoiding it all together – are definitely on the list of 'no nos' when it comes to hoof trimming. We spoke to three leading claw health specialists to compile a list of both 'dos and don'ts' when it comes to preventing and tackling lameness.

text **Rachael Porter**

Lameness levels across UK herds are still averaging around 33% and with the average cost of a case of lameness estimated to be around £320, this is damaging businesses' bottom lines as well as the health, welfare and fertility of many herds.

Hoof trimming, both preventative and to treat lame cows, is part of the solution.

But it can be problematic on many units. Some units need to do more – particularly with regard to 'functional' preventative regular trimming.

But the biggest problem seen by some of the top hoof trimming and lameness specialists is 'excessive' trimming.

"A foot trim is a bit like a haircut – it's what you leave behind that counts," says

vet Nick Bell, from the Royal Veterinary College. "But there's almost a compulsion for producers and foot trimmers to over trim feet. They think that if they pick up a foot that they have to use their knife." Sara Pedersen, a vet specialising in hoof care and cattle mobility, agrees: "The mantra should be 'foot check, not foot trim'. I see far too many feet that have been over trimmed, particularly the heel of the inside back claws. It's a big problem and can actually cause lameness, rather than prevent it," she says.

Raise awareness

"There's a perception, among some producers and foot trimmers, that a foot hasn't been trimmed correctly if the bottom of the hoof isn't clean and white. But it's unusual to see a problem on the inside claw on the hind feet and so if it is the correct length and healthy, leave it alone.

"Less' is definitely more in many cases and there's a real need to raise awareness on this."

US foot trimming guru Karl Burgi travels around the world and where ever he goes he sees excessive trimming. "My experience is that once operators pick up a hoof knife or a grinder, they think they have to use it. Even if there's nothing much to do.

"I think they rush in too, rather than examining the foot thoroughly and considering how best to tackle a potential lesion.

"As a result, they don't do the job properly – they either go in too hard and cause more problems, or not hard enough and the cow doesn't recover. It's a fine line to tread and that's why it's not a job for people without training, experience and, most importantly, time."

It's vital that producers and foot trimmers are clear about what they're trying to achieve before they pick up a hoof knife, according to Dr Bell.

"There are two main points here – correcting foot angle and restoring balance flat weight-bearing surface. Both will ensure that the cow's weight is distributed evenly and away from the inner sole and on to the strongest part of the hoof – the wall."

He says that if producers work towards getting those two things right, then everything else should fall into place. "But people make lots of mistakes. They fall into bad habits and forget those basic principles."

When correcting foot angle, it's important not to over trim the heel. "And that they don't touch the inside claw of the back

foot at all,” he stresses. “The focus should be on the front third of the toes really, as this tips the cow forward and creates a steeper and more correct foot angle.

“A common mistake is to over trim the inside heels. Trimmers have good intentions; they want the foot to look neat and tidy and will cut the whole length of the sole. It looks beautifully clean and white, but stripping away just 1mm from the surface removes the hardened layer that protects the hoof. The horn underneath is softer and more prone to wear and bruising. By removing this layer the trimmer could actually be causing a lameness issue.”

Restoring balance

When it comes to restoring balance, the second of the two objectives of functional foot trimming, excessive trimming is also a problem. “This tends to be over done. Most herds have pretty well-balanced claws, on the whole, when you evaluate feet carefully. But trimmers tend to ‘over grind’ the heel,” explains Dr Bell.

“Many sound cows only need a bit off the toes and then to ‘model out’ the sole. But ‘dishing out’ needs to be done with a sharp knife to make it deep and wide enough to prevent trauma at the sole ulcer site.

Angle grinders have a lot to answer for. Some trimmers get both these points correct and then undo their efforts with a ‘tidy up’. I’ve seen many people run the grinder down along the wall and even between the toes to neaten the appearance of the foot.

But that’s like thinning the walls that support a building. It may look nice, but it’s not going to be very strong.”

Being a bit ‘rugged’ is the key here. “It’s OK to be a bit messy if you know that there are no problems – even I’ve had to discipline myself on this. And you can’t see the bottom of the foot once the cow is standing on it, so picture the standing cow as you’re trimming and make sure you’re not undermining her foundations.”

Another problem is ‘digging’. “Some trimmers can’t resist digging away at a dark spot on a hoof. But if a cow’s not lame then leave it alone. Unless I’m absolutely sure that what I’m looking at is a developing lesion, I’ll leave it alone.

“A degree of experience and knowledge helps here. But remember that you can always pick a foot up again later and have another look. But it’s impossible to put horn back once it’s been removed. So proceed with caution.”

As a rule of thumb, he recommends that if you can see a black mark in the sole

ulcer site then remove it. “Use a pair of hoof testers and if it’s solid and she’s not bothered when you press down on it then leave it alone,” he says.

“And if there’s a line of black dirt in the white line in the heel of an outside claw then I’ll explore it, particularly if there is pocket forming. But tentatively. It’s a job of prioritisation and for sound cows, having solids walls is more important than clean white lines.”

Having a decent handling system and a crush that’s close to the milking parlour is a huge help. “If it’s simple to pull out a cow and lift her feet then it’s also easier to resist the temptation to trim unnecessarily. CowSignals trainers say that it should take one person just one minute to get a cow in a crush.”

If it’s easy to lift feet then it’s easier to treat them and Karl Burgi believes that this will also reduce the number of chronic cases on dairy units. “Treating lame cows takes time, but if it’s done correctly and ‘early’ then very few will become chronic cases and even fewer will fail to recover.”

He believes that many producers’ tolerance is too high when it comes to lameness and they wait too long before they take action. “And sometimes this may be because it’s difficult to get cows into a crush so making it a time consuming job. So make it easier on yourself – and your cows. And watch those chronic and untreatable cases disappear from your herd.”

Zero tolerance

He’d like to see more producers taking a zero tolerance approach to lameness. “On some units, abnormal becomes normal. This has to change and it’s up to everyone who is involved in managing the herd to flag up a problem when they see it. And if a cow with poor locomotion is spotted, there should be a policy to lift her feet and deal with any problems that same day.”

Mr Burgi stresses that the quicker a problem is dealt with, the better the outcome usually is. “

Training can help here, according to Sara Pedersen. “Be it taking a Dairyland functional hoof trimming course for the inexperienced or a refresher course for those who feel they’ve developed some bad habits or simply want to update their skills.

“The key to routine trimming is to know what you’re trying to achieve and why. Successful remedial trimming relies on recognising lesions and knowing how to treat them effectively. Far too many producers and trimmers do something



Functional trimming: the outer claw has been ‘dished out’ to redress balance



Toe trim: focus on the front third to create a steeper and more correct foot angle



Therapeutic trim: a hoof with a white line lesion, treated correctly with a block applied

just because they’ve watched someone else do it. You should never take a grinder around the edge of a foot, but there are plenty of trimmers out there who do. When I’ve asked them why, they’ve all said ‘because I’ve seen someone else do it’. So training – and re-training where necessary – is vital.” |