

Excessive rainfall means that feet have suffered this summer

'Lame' weather impacts on hoof health

The wet weather has played havoc with hoof health. We spoke to a producer, a vet and a hoof trimmer to find out why, and to get some tips on how to deal with lameness both now and in the coming winter.

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Cow's feet have suffered this summer – so much for their usual outdoor respite away from wet slurry and concrete. Not only have conditions outside been muddy and damp, but many herds have been re-housed, even if only for a short period, because grazing land was simply too wet.

And now lameness issues, which usually



Digital dermatitis: compounded by weather



Heel erosion: 'soft' feet are susceptible



Toe necrosis: swift treatment is vital

ease during the five months or so of the year when cattle are outside and conditions are relatively dry under foot, are causing problems that have the potential to get worse as cows are housed for the winter.

Shropshire-based producer Jim Franklin, who runs a 100-cow herd in partnership with his father Richard and step-mother Helen, is seeing a lot of cracked heels. They're the result of cows' feet being wet for a long period of time – or sodden, as he describes it.

"I've never seen conditions like it and thankfully it's eased a little during the past couple of weeks, but the damage is done. My hoof trimmer is lifting a lot more feet that he would normally be doing at this time of year and cracked heels and soft hooves are paving the way for problems, like sole ulcers and white-line disease, both now and later in the year. I don't usually see those kinds of hoof problems in August and September – or even October."

He likens cow hooves softening to humans' finger nails after a long soak in the bath. "The cows then walk on wet cow tracks, churning them up and treading on a few stones along the way. It's a recipe for disaster."

He was advised by his vet to put an extra layer or two of wood chippings on his cow tracks. "A 15-tonne load of chippings has helped a little, but not as much as a few days of sunshine and a little less rain has," he says.

"I'm just disappointed as the cows' feet usually get a little respite during the summer. They should be nice and dry and hard. But that just hasn't happened this year.

"My one consolation is that my herd is housed in a straw-bedded loose yard during the winter – so at least their softened hooves won't be subject to the rigours of concrete passageways in a cubicle shed."

Registered foot trimmer Steve Paul has seen a lot of lameness problems this summer. "Namely caused by cows being outside in wet conditions – soggy cow tracks and gateways in particular – but also caused by changes in their diet. One minute they're outside on grass and the next they're back inside and being fed a TMR.

"Sudden dietary changes are not good for cows and they're not good for their feet. And I think the full effects of this are going to be seen during the next two or three months, when cows are re-housed for the winter."

Summer respite

Hooves do usually have a chance to harden up in the summer, when conditions out at grass are generally drier – and cleaner – than they are during winter housing. Foul in the foot is causing a few problems, exacerbated by cows standing around in wet and muddy areas, such as gateways and around water and feed troughs.

"We're no busier than usual – we trim feet all year round. But one thing that is changing is that dairy producers are being more proactive and rather than waiting for lameness problems to present themselves, they're routinely lifting every cow's feet two or three times a year.

"I'd say that this heightened pro-activity is going to pay off this year – the wet weather means that it's more important than ever," says Steve.

He adds that cow rations are also vital, particularly the mineral balance. "Nutrition's role in preventing lameness is underestimated. If a mineral is deficient, it will show in her feet. And it will also show if she's getting all the minerals she needs too – her feet will benefit."

Necrosis, particularly in the toe, is a growing problem in cows' feet, compounded by the wet conditions this summer. And it's a tough one to tackle,

according to cattle vet Rob Drysdale, from the Westpoint Veterinary Group. "It's the result of hairy heel warts – a condition similar mud fever seen in horses in wet weather. We don't usually see it in cattle, but it's been so wet."

Preventing problems

DairyCo's extension office Jo Speed describes it as 'nasty': "Toe necrosis is difficult to clear up and treatment – as soon as you spot it – is vital."

She urges producers to get their vet involved. "You need to remove the surface infection – not a nice job – and then remove any other infection in the foot until you have an open lesion. This then needs to be treated with an antibiotic or any other product that your vet recommends."

If you're struggling to get on top of hoof health problems, she also recommends getting involved in DairyCo's Healthy Feet programme. "It's tailored to your herd's specific lameness issues and is designed to put you firmly back in control of hoof health, with the emphasis very much on preventing problems occurring in the first place."

Most producers only lift cows' feet at drying off and won't see them again for between 60 and 80 days. "This year has been unprecedented in that we're urging producers to lift feet again just after calving," says vet Rob Drysdale.

Rob says that mobility scoring really comes into its own here: "It's key to managing any increase in possible lameness issues. Catch problems early, before they become more serious. It's all about treatment and prevention.

"And remember that we're not just talking about preventing lameness when we're looking at cows' feet. If a cow can't walk freely and easily – without pain and discomfort – she won't eat, drink and behave in a way that's conducive to good health and fertility." |

