

Early intervention is key to preventing lameness

A trim in time...

We set out to dispel some of the myths and misconceptions about mobility scoring. Could they be creating a barrier between your herd and tip-top hoof health?

text Rachael Porter



Uptake of regular mobility scoring is disappointing, according to vets and researchers, despite overwhelming evidence that highlights the benefits of lifting cows feet and correcting minor locomotion problems before they develop into serious lameness cases.

So why aren't more producers getting to grips with it and reaping the benefits that a spring in their cows' steps can bring?

"There are several reasons, most of them extremely complex," says Bristol vet School's Becky Whay, a specialist hoof health researcher who jointly led the work that then allowed DairyCo's Healthy Feet Programme to be developed.

"Not least is that producers are extremely time poor and many see it as yet another task that they just simply can't squeeze into their already packed working day. It may not be the mobility scoring itself that they are concerned about, but moreover the time that then has to be allocated to lift the feet and treat cows with less than ideal locomotion.

"And these producers don't usually have the set up or the facilities to easily lift and trim cows' feet – or the correct skill set." She says that some may have also become disillusioned from picking up cows' feet and not being able to see why she's scored one or two on the mobility scale, rather than zero.

"In a third of cases, the problem is bruising and that can't be easily seen. There's not the gratification that you get when you lift the feet of an extremely lame cow, find a stone or a lesion and treat and trim the feet, and then see the cow walk away with an improved gait."

Mobility scoring

Dr Whay says that other producers say that they already mobility score their cows every day, by watching them carefully as they walk into the parlour, for example. "And I don't doubt that they do, but it's not part of a formal routine so there's every chance that even if a cow with less than perfect mobility is spotted that she won't be looked at. She could easily be forgotten about. Doing it this way won't necessarily trigger the next action that's required.

"Mobility scoring is very much about preempting lameness. Remember early treatment is not only less costly, it's also more effective."

Ideally, she'd like to see herds – particularly black-and-white herds that are statistically more prone to lameness problems – being mobility scored every fortnight. "But if that was too much in terms of labour, I'd still be happy with

Programme's progress

Just 16 months since its launch, DairyCo's Healthy Feet Programme is now running on 180 dairy units.

A total of 98 mentors – vets and licenced hooftrimmers – have been trained to help producers understand the risk factors on farm. Around 43,000 cows are benefiting from the scheme. The levy-funded organisation also provides mobility scoring DVDs, score sheets and laminated cards to aid mobility scoring and lesion

identification for producers who want to assess their own herds.

All resources are available for download or can be ordered via www.dairyco.org.uk/healthyfeet.

"Early detection is vital, so we're encouraging producers to do that – either themselves or through taking part in the programme," says DairyCo's R&D manager Jenny Gibbons.

"Prompt treatment is important to prevent cows from becoming lame."

monthly. Even bi-monthly or quarterly is better than not at all."

West Sussex-based vet Rob Drysdale, from the Westpoint Veterinary Group, agrees that fortnightly scoring would be the gold standard. His practice already has several clients, totalling 6,500 cows, that are monitored and managed for mobility, from Kent to Dumfries and down into Cornwall.

That said, he says he'd like to see more herds doing it. A typical comment he gets from producers is 'I don't need to do it – I can see when a cow is lame.' But he says that that misses the point completely.

Cost saving

Mobility scoring isn't about picking up cows that are obviously lame – those that score three on the DairyCo scale, which runs from zero for a cow that walks completely normally to three for a cow that's obviously lame.

"We're looking to identify cows before they become obviously lame, thereby avoiding the costs and losses associated with that." He says that picking up the feet of cows that score one (walking normally but with a suspicion of possible lameness) and score two (not walking normally) gives producers a head start on lameness. They can deal with a possible problem before it starts.

"To trim and rebalance a cow's feet could save between £200 and £300. The cost of a typical case of sole ulcer is £380. You only need to avoid, or even catch early, one or two cases to make it a financially viable exercise.

"And remember that losses can begin to occur – in terms of milk production and fertility – often well before a cow presents itself as truly lame."

Some producers have learned about the huge benefits of mobility scoring – both in economic and welfare terms – the hard way. Mr Drysdale is currently working

with one herd that had just 49% mobility. "Toe necrosis – one of the nastiest stages of lameness – was found in 30 cows and most will have to be culled as it was in the chronic stage. Regular mobility scoring could have picked up a problem much sooner and the repercussions of poor track maintenance and the wet summer would have been much less severe."

After just six weeks of mobility scoring and treating problem cows' mobility in this herd has increased to 59% and daily milk yields have also increased by two litres a cow.

"We've introduced regular foot bathing and trimming, as well as fortnightly scoring to pick up any problems quickly, and it's working well.

"The herd manager feels back in control and they'll soon be in a position where they don't have any cows that score three on the scale. Mobility scoring means that very rarely will you see anything other than ones and twos."

Targeted advice

Mr Drysdale says that those clients that are on a contract for mobility scoring would be paying around £10 per head per year.

"And that's for a specialist vet and targeted advice. We don't just score the cows and leave you to get on with it. A list of 'musts', 'shoulds' and 'coulds' is provided and some of the things that need to be changed can be relatively inexpensive.

"Whatever it costs, mobility scoring is about so much more than investing in hoof health anyway. It's very much about avoiding production diseases and extending the life and increasing the productivity of your herd," he adds.

"It is literally a 'bottom up' investment. Look after your cows' feet and you're a long way towards them looking after you and your business." |