

Easy testing and an industry scheme leaves producers no excuse on Johne's control

Don't gamble with Johne's

Producers who don't test for Johne's cannot be sure that their cows are not affected. This is the message from the Johne's action group, which introduced a national six-strand approach to control in July. It is confirmed by Hereford-based producer Rob Davies, who supports his claims with first-hand experience.

text **Karen Wright**

It's true, 10 years ago I would have held my hand up and said that, as I'd never seen a cow with Johne's, I was sure my herd wasn't affected," says Rob Davies, from Ross-on-Wye. "I now know – through experience – that unless you're testing you don't actually know. Johne's 'hides' and affected cows may be culled for many other reasons, such as poor yields and poor fertility and other diseases, before Johne's is in its clinical phase. Actually it may well be Johne's that's causing the problems in the first place."

'Bought-in' Johne's

For Rob, who runs the 100-cow mainly black-and-white herd yielding 9,500 litres in partnership with his wife Rachel and his parents, the Johne's problem 'arrived' with a few bought-in cows about 14 years ago. A previously closed herd 'forever', a TB outbreak left them short on numbers – the 150-cow milking herd was down to 100. So, to speed up rebuilding numbers, they bought in 13 cows and 13 heifers from reliable sources – or so they thought.

"What a mistake that was," says Rob. "We spent good money on the animals and got Johne's and BVD thrown in with the price. We avoided markets, but went to good herd dispersal sales. The producers confirmed they'd never seen Johne's in their herds and we took this as good enough evidence."

Typical of Johne's, the effect of the

disease wasn't seen immediately. "We had some rumbling problems, but nothing more than the usual herd issues.

Weight loss was a bit of a problem in early lactation though and this prompted our vet Nigel Misselbrook, from Chase View, to suggest that we tested for Johne's."

An initial blood test on all 120 cows at Hopes Ash Farm revealed Johne's in five animals. "Looking back through the records, I can see that Johne's affected cows had suffered clinically related symptoms like weight loss and scouring at times of stress like calving and ration changes. These cows were on the decline and had I known that they were suffering from the disease I would probably have culled them then. It's highly likely I'd had the disease in the herd for a decade, since buying in cattle, but without knowing it."

Now, any test positive cows are immediately marked with a red ear tag, along with their offspring, to clearly identify them as a Johne's risk. Control measures have also been put in place to prevent transmission of the disease from cow to calf. Milk from 'red' cows is not fed to any dairy calves and these cows are not used to breed replacement dairy heifers. Slurry is not spread on grazing





Rob Davies: "It's poor management to assume you haven't got Johne's without testing"

ground, so there's no chance of the persistent MAP pathogen infecting cattle at grass. The latest control measure is to calve 'reds' in a separate place. "This is a challenge in winter when there's pressure on housing space – but we know how important it is so we will make sure it happens," adds Rob. His aim is to minimise any risks, but in a practical way. "We're not talking about many animals or expensive control measures, but if we manage Johne's we can avoid spread and gradually work it out of the herd, as much as we can." Johne's testing is now so much easier too. "We started with blood tests, but

our vets told us that the milk test is just as good. So now we use the NMR Herdwise service that uses the milk recording sample every quarter to carry out a Johne's test. It happens automatically and I don't have to worry about remembering to organise it. The results come through on InterHerd and I discuss them with the vet – we work as a team on this."

Like many diseases, Johne's requires routine testing or screening, according to NMR vet and technical group chair of the National Johne's Action Group Karen Bond. "With Johne's disease we see peaks and troughs of antibody production. Once an animal has tested positive then she is immediately on the radar, but those that test negative may still be infected and turn positive at a future test. It's vital that producers at least establish the status of their herd and to do this they need to test routinely. "Depending on the outcome, they can work out a control plan with their vet to prevent spread within their herd. Or, if they find no evidence of disease, then a good biosecurity and routine surveillance plan can maintain this status."

Test positive cows need identifying and managing as a Johne's risk. It may not be necessary to cull



Six-strand approach to Johne's disease

Producers and vets can base a control on one of these six strategies

- Biosecurity – protect and monitor
- Improved farm management
- Improved farm management and strategic testing
- Improved farm management and test and cull
- Breed to terminal sire
- Firebreak vaccination

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The box details the Johne's Action Group's recently launched six-strand approach. "This gives a starting point for Johne's control in all herds, whatever their status, which can be used by vets and producers. These 'strands' provide a structure for developing a bespoke control programme for the particular unit.

Risk management

Rob sees no need to panic if a cow tests positive. "She can still earn her keep. We have one who has just had her eighth calf. She's now 10 and she's given plenty of milk in her lifetime."

"Many producers cannot afford to cull cows immediately when they test positive because they are already struggling with other diseases such as TB," adds Karen Bond.

"This isn't necessary as long as any test positive cow is identified and managed as a Johne's risk, particularly at calving, and closely monitored for the onset of clinical signs to allow her to be culled for a decent price before she fades away."

And this is how Rob Davies operates now. "We have robots to milk cows that also weigh them daily so we can soon pick up rapid weight loss. Once a Johne's positive cow starts to lose weight she is culled immediately."

Rob is keen that other producers realise the importance of testing and controlling Johne's. "With the availability of a simple milk test for Johne's there is really no excuse," he adds. "As responsible food producers, we have an obligation to do something about Johne's in the national dairy herd and it is poor management to assume you have no Johne's without checking properly." |