

Two feet – not four – but

These boots are

Producers lavish a lot of care and attention of their cows' hooves. But how good are they at looking after their own feet? We spoke to two physiotherapists and a boot manufacturer to find out why personal 'hoof care' is so vital

text **Rachael Porter**

Dairy producers can spend a significant proportion of their working day, if not all of it, standing on concrete. And, just like their cows, this can leave them vulnerable to 'lameness'. Depending on its severity, this can have catastrophic consequences for their dairy business. So says Gloucestershire-based physiotherapist Clare Woodward, who has 20 years of experience and comes from a farming background.

"It really is a case of 'no foot, no farmer'," she explains. "Standing on concrete is not what our feet were designed to do. It results in excessive pronation of the foot, meaning that the arch of the foot collapses and rolls inwards. As the feet pronate there is excessive biomechanical stress placed on the joints and soft tissues in the foot."

She says that this can result in a number of painful conditions in the foot itself, such as bunions, corns, plantar fasciitis (a tightening of the soft tissues in the sole of the foot) and metatarsalgia (inflammation of the metatarsal joints at the front of the foot).

Correct footwear

"Compensatory misalignment can then also occur throughout the rest of the musculoskeletal system, which can cause ankle, shin, knee, hip and even lower back pain."

The good news is that, just as in dairy cows, 'lameness' is preventable – and it doesn't need to involve a cattle crush and or a vet! The key focus here is wearing the correct footwear. "Producers wear Wellingtons for extremely long periods throughout the working day – not great footwear when it comes to looking after your feet as most don't have a good, supportive foot bed. So it's vital to invest in a good pair of boots that do – it's important that the foot is supported. Ideally, producers should be wearing boots with a foot bed that holds the joints of the foot in a good biomechanical position," explains Miss Woodward. "This will optimise the position of the foot and



Well worn: Wellingtons should be comfortable, support the arch and heel of the foot – and be waterproof!

some TLC is still required

made for 'milking'



prevent foot conditions from occurring, as well as optimising the position of the ankles, knees, hips and pelvis.”

She says that producers should take every opportunity they can to change into different footwear throughout the working day. “Something like a pair of leather dealer boots would be ideal. Anything that’s supportive, breathable and easier to walk in.”

She says that good shock absorption is important too, again to prevent damage to the feet and lower limbs. As is good insulation. Cold feet lead to circulation problems and can result in chilblains and other ‘nasties’.

False economy

“Cheap Wellingtons are typically pretty flimsy and flat in the sole. So, if nothing else, pay a bit more for your boots and look for a cushioned sole and a foot bed that supports the arch of the foot. You need something for the arch to ‘relax’ onto, that holds the foot in the correct position.

“And replace your boots when they’re worn out and your feet no longer feel supported – don’t wait to get a hole in them. It’s a false economy because if you damage your feet and require physiotherapy, you’ll spend around £45 per session. Since most conditions require quite a few sessions to sort out, the bill can run into hundreds of pounds, yet you can buy a decent pair of boots for much less than that – and save yourself a lot of money – as well as pain and hassle.”

Cornwall-base physiotherapist Torquil Dick, who is married to a dairy producer’s daughter, agrees that buying ‘economy’ boots is a recipe for trouble. “Scrimp now and pay later applies to any footwear that’s simply not up to the job.”

His perfect boot has the all-important supportive foot bed, but also a cushioned heel, which helps to support the arch of the foot. “And I also like to see support under the big toe. A lack of support here is definitely linked to lower back pain.”

Inadequate footwear

He says the starting point for any patient presenting with back pain is the feet. “We look at the footwear and the feet and work our way up.”

The number-one condition in ‘Wellington wearers’ and indeed anyone spending prolonged periods on their feet in inadequate footwear is something called ‘turf toe’, the inflammation of what’s known as the PIP joint in the big toe. “This is caused by over use, which occurs if the boots don’t fit properly – typically they’ll be too big or too wide,” he says.

Comfort and support are vital

Darren McMurran, Banbridge, Co Down. 320-cow herd, currently expanding to 500 cows, averaging 12,100 litres
 “Boot comfort is really important to me, particularly since I easily spend more than eight hours every day wearing them. I look for a pair of boots that give good ankle and leg support, and they’ve

got to be light – they can’t be clumsy. And for safety reasons they have to have good tread, to offer plenty of grip.
 “As one of the 2014 NMR/RABDF Gold Cup finalists, I received a complementary pair of Bekina boots and, compared with some other brands available, these tick all the boxes.”



Sound investment: built for support

Plantar fasciitis – inflammation of the sole of the foot – would be next most common complaint and is the result of inadequate arch support. “So we’d recommend boots with greater support as treatment and prevention.”

Two other common conditions in boot wearers are Achilles tendonitis and policeman’s heel. The latter is an inflammation of the fat pad under the heel and the former is an inflammation of the tendon at the back of the foot, where the calf attaches to the foot.

“So make sure your boots are the correct size, they’re not too wide, and they offer support and cushioning to both the arch of the foot and the heel. Invest in some good boots and replace them when they start to wear and you feel that they no longer offer maximum foot support. “Runners don’t wait for their trainers to fall apart before they replace them – they know that after so many miles

they should be replaced as their shock absorption and support begins to diminish.

“It’s the same for Wellingtons. Buy some that put a spring in your step and, when you can’t feel that anymore, throw them away and buy a new pair.”

Producer survey

A survey of more than 200 producers, carried out by Bekina Boots, during the past 12 months revealed that they spend an average nine hours per day, or more on wet days, wearing their boots. On dry days this was reduced to an average of over four hours.

And 63% of producers indicated comfort as the main factor when choosing a new pair of boots, followed by durability (22%), a non-slip sole (16%) and insulation (16%).

“So they are looking at the important factors that can protect foot health,” says the company’s Michelle Lofthouse. “Half of the producers questioned replaced their boots at least once a year – that should ideally be a larger percentage. And leaking was the reason recorded by 82% of the respondents as to why boots were replaced, followed by worn out tread by 30%. There was no mention of comfort or foot support.”

She says that the company’s main concern is comfort and safety, with a focus on the well-being of the producer – particularly his feet.

“Our boots are made from polyurethane, which has three major characteristics that make them ideal for producers,” she explains. “It’s a flexible material,

which makes for a comfortable and hard-wearing boot. It’s also durable and that is essential if our boots are going to offer value for money. Trails have shown that polyurethane lasts longer than PVC and rubber.

“And polyurethane is also lightweight. Producers who wear our boots often report that their feet are less tired at the end of the day.”

Bekina boots also come with two types of insole – the standard and the ergonomic foot bed. The latter gives extra support to the heel and arch, and also offers a degree of cushioning.

Ergonomic fit

The Agrilite comes with the insole and the Steplite X, which is a boot that’s also available in wider fittings, offers the more comfortable ergonomic foot bed. “Both products – the insole and foot bed – are new and the standard insole now has three layers. The ergonomic foot bed has two layers and, thanks to the cushioning effect, it offers excellent shock absorption,” explains Ms Lofthouse.

Lab tests have also revealed that the boots offer thermal insulation in temperatures as low as –50°C, depending on the model of boot, keeping feet warm in the winter and even in extremely cold temperatures.

And the company says that producers can expect the boots to last for 12 months, when worn for eight hours a day. “This can be a longer or shorter lifespan, depending on the level of use,” says Ms Lofthouse. “So we advise customers to look out for signs that boots need replacing. Perhaps they no longer provide support or drip/anti-slip. The sole profile is the most important criterion to consider, but too many producers still wait for their boots to start leaking – by then our boots are usually well past their best in terms of providing good arch and heel support and preventing ‘lameness’ problems.” |

