

Vets and producers urged to identify potential risk factors for Johne's disease

Assessing risk key to control

At the recent Johne's disease conference, the challenge was set for the industry to progress to the second phase of the national control plan. But what progress has been made so far and where do vets and producers need to focus their attention?

text **Ben Bartlett**



Healthy cows: many herds have already begun to put a plan in place to tackle Johne's disease

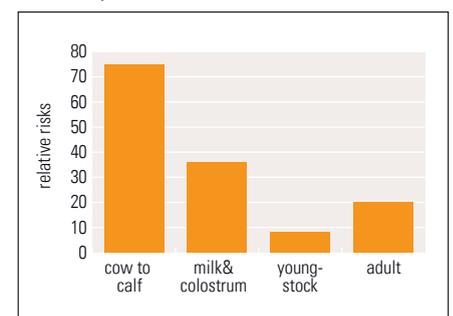
As the second phase of the national Johne's disease control plan is rolled out, there's increased emphasis on ensuring that producers are engaged with one of the six control strategies, set out in the plan. Producers need to understand the risk factors that could allow Johne's disease to enter and spread within their herd.

More than 85% of British herds have signed up to the National Johne's Management Plan through their milk buyers. For these producers, this second phase requires a declaration from a vet who has completed the British Cattle Veterinary Association training course. And this declaration will show that the producer has an appropriate and robust Johne's management plan in place, given the farm-specific risks established through the assessment.

Risk assessments

National Milk Laboratories' vet adviser Eamon Watson is confident that many producers have already responded to the call to control Johne's on a national level. "Data taken from the NML database, which covers the majority of British herds, shows that more than 35% have engaged in individual-cow testing through NML during the past 12 months. And there are a number of other labs that offer Johne's disease testing, so the true national figure will be much higher. There will also be a number of herds that have a valid Johne's control plan in place without regular testing," he says. Key to progress in encouraging producer engagement in Johne's disease control has been the completion of risk assessments by producers with their vet

Figure 1: The assessment of relative risks of Johne's spread across 300 herds





Emily Baxter: "We have used the risk-assessment process to keep herds on track with Johne's disease control"

to assess the effectiveness of control plans. Vet Emily Baxter, from Wiltshire-based Drove Farm Vets, has used NML's risk-assessment tool to good effect. The tool, provided through the MyHealthyHerd management system, assesses the risk of Johne's disease entering a herd and the risk of spread on farm. And it provides a prediction of future disease levels, based on test results from the herd and the findings from the risk assessment.

"We have used the risk-assessment process to keep herds on track with Johne's disease control," says Miss Baxter. "The risk assessment questionnaire has been a useful tool in helping our vets and clients to target Johne's on farm. It has allowed us to address the risks of disease entry and spread for each herd and to tailor control measures for individual clients."

Clear picture

The practice runs an active producer discussion group. "We launched the questionnaire at one of our 'dairy early warning' club meetings and, since then, many producers have found it beneficial to get a clear picture of not only their current Johne's status, but also a predicted future prevalence of the disease in their herd based on their current control measures. Having this means that we are able to identify



Calf hygiene: good management at calving reduces Johne's 'risk'

and help producers who need to put additional control measures in place."

Looking at the risk-assessment findings, Miss Baxter discovered that although the analysis from many of the practice's herds showed that robust controls were in place with respect to colostrum management and feeding, the area of most concern was often the calving pen and management of high-risk cows.

"This is particularly relevant as a high proportion of Johne's disease infection occurs in a calf's first few weeks of life." The results from the assessments, completed by Drove Farm Vets, mirror the data from 300 risk assessments completed by NML during the past four months. Figure 1 shows that cow-to-calf transmission is by far the key risk area for Johne's control, which has been highlighted by the risk assessments. Addressing this risk on farm isn't always

easy and a clear policy involving all farm staff is required to ensure careful management both at and around calving. But taking some simple steps can make a difference. Examples include recognising high-risk cows through repeated testing and identify them with a red tag. This will ensure that all farm staff can identify these cows and segregate them at calving.

Colostrum feeding

Good hygiene in and around the calving area is also key to reducing risk. Clean, dry bedding and frequent cleaning and disinfection of calving pens is vital – and not just for Johne's disease control. Attention to colostrum feeding is also important. When feeding replacement heifer calves, producers must use colostrum from low-risk cows.

On an increasing number of units there are signs that producers are tightening the noose on Johne's disease. But the challenge is to maintain a continued reduction of prevalence to a point where Johne's disease is no longer a cause of health and production losses on farm. Ensuring that every producer recognises the risk of disease entry and spread is a critical first step. Not only will this improve the health status of British herds, but it will also make a difference as the industry looks to take advantage of new market opportunities both at home and abroad. |

NMR HerdWise Best Practice competition open for entries

Now in its third year, the HerdWise Best Practice competition is open for entries. This competition is designed to recognise 'best practice' in Johne's control. Entrants must complete an application form and short-listed farms will then be visited by the chairman of the Johne's Action Group,

Lyndon Edwards; and vet Karen Bond. The winner will be presented with the award at the NMR/RABDF Gold Cup open day, at Pilsdon Dairy Farm near Bridport in Dorset, on June 28. The winner will receive a silver plate, a hamper and a cheque for £500. [Application form: www.nmr.co.uk](http://www.nmr.co.uk)