

Barnard Castle-based vet Debby Brown, who works for Dugdale Nutrition, takes a look at health and welfare issues that can affect dairy herds across the UK. This time she focuses on a rare condition that often requires surgery – where possible.



# Battle of **the bulge**

Ventral hernia is an unusual condition that's difficult to treat. It's not a typical condition to see in dairy cows – but it does occur. I've seen just two in more than 20 years of practice, thankfully, because treatment isn't easy and cows are usually sent off at the end of their lactation. Pregnancy will simply exacerbate the issue and a strenuous calving won't end well – for the cow or her calf. The first one I saw was memorable as the cow just couldn't push her calf out. The muscle was so badly breached by the hernia and this meant that there was nothing to 'push' against and she was in trouble. That case resulted in a C-section and a hernia repair in one operation. I think she completed her lactation, but I doubt she'd have been put back in calf – it would have been too risky. There was a recent hernia case highlighted on Twitter – a cow carrying twins who, after calving, looked like she was still carrying a third. The vet was called and a hernia was diagnosed. She is a relatively small cow and was carrying two calves, each weighing 37kg. Unfortunately this hernia is untreatable – the rumen has pushed through the abdominal wall and is sitting next to the skin. So any attempt to operate and correct would most likely puncture the rumen. It's unsightly – she looks to be still in calf – but she's otherwise healthy. Another pregnancy and calving would probably result in further problems. So this cow will complete her lactation but there will be no more calves. A kick or knock from other cows can injure and weaken the muscle wall can predispose the cow to. And carrying twins or even a large calf can be the cause, particularly in older cows. There's nothing really that producers can do to prevent it – it's just bad luck.



## Encyclopaedia: **ventral hernia**

### Cause

A weakening or injury to the abdominal wall. This could be as a result of a knock from another cow or carrying a large calf or a multiple pregnancy. Most typically seen in cows that have carried twins and older cows.

### Diagnosis

A large 'bulge', either through the cow's flank or underside. Veterinary diagnosis typically follows a physical examination, when other conditions have been ruled out. Treatment: surgical intervention is possible and sometimes

successful – depending on the size and position of the hernia. The cost of the operation can be high and has to be offset against the value of the animal and the likelihood of a successful outcome.

### Prevention

Difficult to prevent due to the random and rare nature of the condition. To minimise the risk of a hernia caused by injury, ensure that adult cattle in the herd are polled. A head butt from a horned cow can injure, and therefore weaken, the abdominal muscle wall.