Dairy Newsletter

Improving fertility in your dairy herd

Central Ontario Veterinary Services
132 Commerce Park Drive, Unit N, Barrie ON L4N 8W8
705-722-3232
info@centralontariovet.com

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According to a Canada-wide survey of dairy producers in 2014, reproduction in lactating cows consistently ranked in the top three difficulties encountered on Canadian dairy farms. There are endless variables that affect fertility in dairy cows. These include, but are not limited to: average daily gain (ADG) as a calf, nutrition, housing, stress, infectious disease, lameness, milk production, genetics, body condition score changes, uterine health, and heat detection. As you can imagine there are many other things in a dairy cow's life that impact her fertility.

When it comes to assessing and quantifying an individual cow's or herd level fertility, there are several calculations available to us such as pregnancy rate, conception rate, insemination rate, pregnancy rate at day 21, return to estrus rate, calving interval, etc. All of these rates fail to take into account the ever-changing reasons why every cow who is eligible to be bred is not actually bred. Additionally, things like conception rate can be very difficult to change and improve upon.

That being said, there are many things we can do on a dairy to get more cows pregnant. Starting with baby calves, we need to ensure these calves are gaining well and kept healthy. Calves that gain 0.8kg/day on average have increased survivability and longevity in dairy herds than those that gain less, especially in the first 2 months of life. The recommendations on when to breed these calves has remained fairly consistent over the years, with a targeted age at first calving of 24 months being the most economical. Heifers that calve at greater than 25 months of age have been shown to have poorer conception rates and thus higher culling rates. Knowing which heifers to breed and when can be further assisted by routine ultrasound scanning of heifers as they reach a target age/size. The ultrasound examination will determine if the heifer has started cycling and when the best time to breed her is.

There are many more influences on adult cow fertility. One major thing most dairy farms can improve upon is insemination rate. As Dr. Stephen LeBlanc from the University of Guelph has said, “cows can’t become pregnant unless they’re inseminated.” By getting more semen into more eligible cows we will improve pregnancy rates. Insemination rate can be increased by better heat detection, use of ovulation synchronization programs, and more frequent veterinary fertility visits. With time being an invaluable resource on most dairy farms the use of timed artificial insemination (TAI) using an OVSYNCH protocol can be very beneficial. These TAI programs can be instituted in a blanket manner to all cows that are past their voluntary waiting period but they have much better results when used in conjunction with ultrasound examination of uterine health and structures on the ovaries. Though there is an initial investment in more frequent veterinary fertility visits, medication costs, labour costs, and insemination costs, the profits realized due to increased pregnancy rate and subsequent increased marginal milk will be noticed within 9-18 months.

Additional areas to focus on to increase fertility in the adult cow herd are transition cow health, especially as it relates to uterine health, decreasing and promptly addressing lameness, and ensuring cows maintain or gain body condition score in early lactation.

As your veterinarians we are happy to work on any or all of these areas with you to increase fertility and subsequent profitability on your herd. Do not hesitate to contact the office to discuss this with us.

To discuss increasing the fertility and profitability of your herd, please contact our office by telephone 705-722-3232 or email info@centralontariovet.com

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