

dairying

Avoid the menace of mastitis in early lactation

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RESearch shows that many new cases of mastitis occur in the first couple of weeks after calving. If they do, they were most likely picked up shortly before, not after, the cow calved. To understand why, you need to understand what is happening in the cow's udder pre-calving and its consequences.

Figure 1 shows the periods of high and low risk of acquiring mastitis during the dry period.

The data in Figure 1 shows that the two highest risk periods of acquiring clinical mastitis occur shortly after drying off and shortly before the dry period ends — just before calving.

Why are these times during the dry period so risky?

At the start and end of lactation, the teat end of the dry cow is closing and starting to open up again, respectively. An open teat end is like an open door — it makes entry easy. So it is not surprising that bacterial infection can occur at these times. Pre-calving, the udder is starting to fill up with colostrum milk and this is an ideal food for bacteria.

The types of bacteria that tend to cause mastitis at this time are principally the 'environmental bacteria' — bacteria that can hang around outside the cow's body and flourish there. Quite often these infections won't be noticed for a week or two after calving as the in-



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fection gradually takes hold. It can be difficult to determine if a cow is 'sprung up' or has an infection. It can often take a freshly calved cow a number of days to settle down in the parlour, so a case of mastitis can easily be missed.

What do you need to do?

- **Hygiene is of the utmost importance** — it lowers the population of these environmental bacteria. Disinfection of calving and cubicle areas will help greatly. Cleaning off the back of cubicle beds and applying fresh bedding material daily will help.
- **Vigilance is essential** — draw the milk of each teat at each milking for at least the first week or 10 days after calving. Examine carefully for any signs of abnormality in the milk and, indeed, in the udder. Monitor cow behaviour for unusual signs of restlessness in the crucial early lactation period.

IN SHORT | mastitis

- Maintaining a clean and hygienic environment for cows close to and shortly after calving is an essential part of minimising the risk of early lactation mastitis

