

Taking a closer look at the straw shortage

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A commonly asked question when I am doing calls is what problems are you seeing at the moment?

Farmers would probably be expecting answers along the lines of cows calving, milk fever, calf scour or pneumonia.

At this time of the year, calf diseases such as pneumonia and scour are probably the most frustrating issues that we as vets and farmers have to deal with.

These issues tend to increase as there is more pressure on housing and particularly this

year with the late turnout to grazing.

It appears that cryptosporidium is now more common than all other causes of neonatal scour combined. With the increased use of anti-scour vaccines, we have seen greater control of scours caused by rotavirus and coronavirus.

However, sometimes the greatest risk factors are not disease specific, but are to do with conditions on the farm.

The biggest issue I am seeing at the moment is straw shortage. In Ireland, straw is the main material used for bedding cattle, in particular

cows around calving time and young calves.

It is very good for absorbing moisture and keeping cattle clean, and is a good insulator when calves snuggle down into a fresh bed of straw.

Cows need to be kept clean near calving to prevent calf scour. Newborn calves will suck lots of dirt as they work their way from the cow's dewlap to udder.

If this dirt gets in before colostrum, it is a major risk factor for calf scour. Also, dirty cows present a serious problem if they need a caesarean section.

Dried-in dirt can be very dif-

ficult to remove fully, predisposing those cows to wound infections.

Young calves getting cold are very vulnerable to pneumonia and many other calf diseases. Ventilation and temperature control are other risk factors for calf disease. Better ventilation will reduce the build-up of disease in the environment and keep bedding dry, but we need to remember that young calves are very susceptible to the cold.

Poor harvesting conditions have contributed to the shortage, but also the number of farmers moving from tillage to

dairy is significant. Availability is likely to be an issue into the future. Farmers will have to prioritise calving pens and young calves and explore other options for older cattle, such as peat, wood shavings or various rubber matting systems.

Donal Lynch owns and runs Donal Lynch Veterinary, Tullamore, Co Offaly. Donal Lynch Veterinary is part of XLVets. XLVets is a group of progressive practices who are working together to achieve a better future for agriculture and veterinary in Ireland. Visit www.xlvets.ie.