

Fertility – the next challenge for farmers

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As we move into May, the main focus on farms has shifted towards getting cows back in calf. For some, the breeding season has already kicked off, while others will be starting in the next few weeks.

Most cows calved >35 days will have been seen bulling by this time. If you suspect any non-cycling cows, ultrasound scanning is useful for examining their reproductive tract. While the scanner is out for the non-bullers, also consider scanning cows that had a difficult calving, twins, retained placenta, E. coli mastitis, milk

fever or displaced stomach.

Some of these problems don't directly affect the cow's uterus. However, it is their indirect effects – suppressed immunity, low energy levels and subsequent loss of body condition – that have a negative affect on fertility.

This spring I noted several cows treated for womb infections but still dirty on pre-breeding scan. These cows may or may not have a discharge and can be difficult to identify without scanning.

Cows in low body condition (BCS <2.5) will have difficulty cycling, conceiving or maintaining a pregnancy. Given the

challenging conditions of this spring, cows in low body condition may be a more significant issue this year. Once-a-day milking for a few weeks is an effective way of improving cow condition while maintaining the normal diet.

While having a few cows around when training heifers makes for a (slightly) easier time, breeding heifers early in the season has important economic benefits – it gives heifers time to recover post-calving, which promotes early breeding again next year. Overall, this will help to keep the herd calving pattern compact.

Synchronization of heifers

has become popular practice in Ireland and involves hormone injections with or without an intra-vaginal device. There are protocols to suit all systems, and advantages include very little or no heat detection (useful where heifers are on an out-farm), compact calving and a longer productive cycle where heifers are calved early. Synchronization is not confined to heifers and, while the protocols for cows differ slightly, the advantages are similar.

There are many pieces to the fertility puzzle, from having cows and heifers disease-free and not deficient in minerals, to accurate heat detection and

a fertile bull, it is a combination of these that make for a successful breeding year.

In addition, identifying and treating problem cows early in the breeding season is vital for maximising optimum herd fertility. Speak with your vet for more tailored advice.

Isabel Coen works at Glen Veterinary Clinic, Blind St, Tipperary. Glen Vet Clinic 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.xlvet.ie for more.