

A stitch in time saves nine

ROISIN MCCORMACK

Correct management of the dry cow diet will save many headaches come spring. A deficiency in the dry cow diet can have a major impact on the health of both the cow and calf.

The amount of calcium required in the diet increases from the last week of pregnancy to the first week of lactation. Low blood calcium levels in cows around the time of calving can result in milk fever. Milk fever is one of the most common disorders that affects both suckler and dairy cows around the time of calving. Older cows are more prone

to developing milk fever, as they do not mobilise calcium as readily as heifers.

Subclinical milk fever affects a large number of cows, resulting in retained foetal membranes, decreased fertility and displaced abomasum after calving. In order to prevent cows developing milk fever, magnesium should be supplemented in the dry cow diet, especially in the last month before calving. The level of calcium in the dry cow diet should be restricted to promote the mobilisation of calcium after calving.

The level of minerals required in the dry cow diet

is determined by where you are based in the country, as some areas have lower levels of minerals than others. Mineral deficiencies can result in decreased fertility, stillborn or weak calves and retained foetal membranes.

Minerals can be supplemented either in a dry cow mineral mix fed daily for six to eight weeks before calving or by the administration of a bolus. Note, the boluses on the market do not contain magnesium to prevent milk fever, so dry cow minerals should be applied to forage daily. Vitamin E levels are very low in silage and so must be supplemented

in the dry cow diet. Analysis of silage is essential to determine mineral levels present, especially potassium, which can have a large bearing on milk fever.

Deficiencies in the dry cow diet only become evident at calving or afterwards, but the solutions can be found during the dry period.

Roisin Mc Cormack works at Longford Animal Health Centre, Cooleeney, Shroid, Co Longford, part of XLVets, a group of practices working for better future for agriculture and veterinary in Ireland. See www.xlvets.ie.