

Mastitis Management In Heifers

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When it comes to managing mastitis, most dairy producers direct their efforts to dealing with prevention and treatment practices used on lactating and dry cows. The implementation and use of new practices and products during the last twenty years have significantly reduced intramammary infections (IMIs). While this progress has been of great importance in producing high quality milk and increasing the profitability of producers, the issue of mastitis in heifers continues to be an unrecognized problem (or at least an avoided problem) in many herds.

Throughout the last two decades researchers have conducted numerous studies dealing with mastitis in heifers. Studies have been done to determine the incidence level and to develop various prevention and treatment regimes that can be used to reduce the level of IMIs in heifers. Unfortunately, the recommendations that have come from those studies have received only passing attention by most producers.

I understand that there are many reasons why little attention is given to mastitis in heifers. Cows with IMIs produce less saleable milk, and this has a direct economic effect on the dairy producer. Mastitis in prepartum heifers usually doesn't have an immediate economic impact. Producers see the udders of their milking cows several times a day, and thus new clinical IMIs can easily be observed. The udders of heifers usually aren't looked at until after freshening. Restraining cows to check or treat their udders is a lot easier than catching and checking the udders of heifers. Cows are accustomed to having their udders touched, whereas heifers are not. And the list of reasons goes on.

Because heifers are the future of each dairy herd, I encourage producers to give more attention to investing in prepartum mastitis prevention practices that can return large dividends. One suggested practice that can have a significant effect on future productivity of heifers is based on studies done at the University of Tennessee. The researchers showed that heifers which were given intramammary infusions of a lactating cow mastitis antibiotic in all quarters between 7 and 14 days prepartum produced more than 1100 pounds additional milk the first lactation. Eleven hundred pounds more milk per heifer the first lactation should be worth some extra effort to obtain. The study also showed that only about one-third as many of the treated quarters were infected during the lactation as were the non-treated quarters. This lower quarter infection rate could certainly have an effect on the productivity in subsequent lactations. While this practice may not be appropriate for all herds, it could be a very important one to use in herds that have a significant IMI rate in heifers.

As producers strive to incorporate management practices that will make their businesses fiscally sound and sustainable, I encourage them to give more attention to

mastitis management in heifers. I suggest they discuss heifer mastitis management practices that would be appropriate for their herd with an Extension person, veterinarian, co-op fieldmen, or other knowledgeable consultant.