

Get 'Em Clean !

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The rainy, humid, hot weather that has gripped the southeast region of the country the last many months has had a greater than usual negative impact on the udder health status of dairy cows. Somatic cell count (SCC) scores are up in most herds as they seasonally are, but the values are elevated more this year. State and regional average DHIA SCC data continue to show an increase when compared to the same month a year ago. I suggest producers be attentive to the following points as they try to manage this herd health situation.

1. Be sure the teats and udders get properly cleaned before attaching the milking machine. In many herds the cows have been challenged with damper, wetter housing, facility and pasture/exercise lot conditions which has meant the udders are probably dirtier and have probably received a greater challenge from environmental pathogens that cause intramammary infections and a rise in SCC values. If the teats, teat ends, and lower parts of the udders are not cleaned properly before milking, bacteria will probably be introduced into the mammary glands at milking time. Dry-wipe the teats and lower part of the udder with a towel or hand to remove any loose soil. Use water to wash the teats only if they are really dirty, and then minimize its use and use low pressure water. If the teats are only minimally soiled, I prefer that producers use a pre-dip product instead of water to moisten the dirty teats, clean the teats with a single use towel, and then if necessary, repeat the pre-dip process a second time.
2. The people who milk cows should wear disposable gloves. The gloves can reduce the transfer of bacteria between cows when compared to bare hands, and they protect the hands of the workers. The gloves should be washed off as needed with water to reduce the transfer of bacteria and dirt between cows.
3. Be sure that a proven effective pre-milking teat dip is used to kill bacteria on the surface of the teats after the dirty teats are cleaned. Many good products are available. Follow label use recommendations. Don't dilute the commercial products to save a little money. If bleach is used, use a high quality bleach and dilute it correctly (4 quarts bleach with 1 quart water).
4. Proper application of the pre-dip is required to obtain maximum benefit from the pre-dip. Some producers prefer to use a spray device rather than a cup to apply the pre-dip. Greater care must be used with the spray application method to be sure that the pre-dip is evenly applied around the teats. Uneven application can also occur when cups are used if an inadequate amount of product is not squeezed into the cup reservoirs. Pre-dip cups should be cleaned frequently to remove soil that will accumulate in them.

5. Be sure the pre-dip is left on the teats for at least 25-30 seconds before being wiped off. Adequate contact time of the pre-dip with the bacteria on the teats is needed to get a high percent kill rate. To facilitate having adequate contact time, udder preparation routine may need to be changed. Rather than completely prepping each cow and attaching the milking unit before going on to the next cow, prep cows in groups of three or more (number depends on parlor size and number of people working the parlor). Pre-dip at least three cows before going back to wipe them off. Squirt a few streams of milk from each quarter to check for clinical infections and to remove milk from the teat cisterns that will most likely contain a higher SCC and bacteria content, be sure the ends of the teats are clean, and then attach the milker unit.
6. Use single-use towels/rags to wipe off the pre-dip, clean and dry the teats. Both disposable and reusable cloth towels can be effective if used properly. When cloth towels/rags are used they should be washed after each single use. Use hot water (at least 145-160 degrees F), soap and bleach to wash the towels. Be sure there is adequate water used in the washing machine for the volume of towels being washed. I prefer that the towels be dried after washing. Some producers are not drying their towels. If this practice is used, following proper washing procedures, as mentioned above, is even more important.
7. Be sure the teat ends get properly cleaned before attaching the milking unit. This is where the bacteria get introduced into the mammary gland, so be sure the teat ends are clean. I have mentioned this point several times. It is really important!!!
8. After the milking units are removed, use a proven effective post milking dip to help kill bacteria that get on the teats between milkings. Some dips are available which will both kill bacteria and provide a barrier covering of the teats between milkings. These products can be helpful in reducing the exposure of the teats to environmental pathogens between milkings.
9. Be sure the facilities are kept as clean as possible. Keep the free stalls in good repair and well bedded to encourage cow usage and to minimize the bacteria load present in the bedding material. Use inert, non-organic bedding material, if possible.
10. Have the milking system checked for proper operation on a regular schedule (frequency depends on herd size and use), and replace parts as recommended or needed.

While following these practices may not prevent completely the rise in SCC values we have seen this year in many herds, they should help reduce the impact of the weather and the environment on the udder health status of dairy cows. Producers should contact their veterinarian, extension agent, milk plant/co-op field rep, or consultant for additional suggestions on how to improve the udder health of their herds.