

MILK FEVER PREVENTION

Hypocalcaemia (low calcium in blood) is more than just milk fever. The cases of milk fever that you see and (presumably) treat may be just part of a larger problem. For every milk fever case that you see, there may be a number of less severely affected cows (subclinical) in your herd. They may manifest as cows with reduced appetites, decreased milk yield, retained membranes/uterine infections and slow calvings.

This may mean more work and increased costs for you.

In many instances **Hypocalcaemia is preventable**. Diet is an important factor in susceptibility to and prevention of milk fever.

Diets high in sodium (Na) and potassium (K) will predispose to Hypocalcaemia.

Diets high in chloride (Cl) and sulphate (SO₄) will help control Hypocalcaemia.

Fresh pasture tends to be high in Na and K (effluent paddocks in particular, and those recently fertilized with potash). Hay is usually low in K but not always, so will not necessarily be a good milk fever preventative on its own.

There are a number of products available that can be added to the diet of a cow to reduce her risk of becoming hypocalcaemic. Magnesium is one such product and acts by aiding both calcium absorption and mobilisation in the cow's body.

Dairymag is a liquid magnesium supplement that can be sprayed on grass or hay prior to feeding. Its liquid formulation means that it can achieve an even spread over the feed. It also means that the cattle cannot selectively avoid eating it as they graze or eat hay. As an aside Dairymag is more operator and equipment friendly than causmag.

Magnesium Sulphate, Magnesium Chloride and Causmag are powders/granules that can be dusted on grass, hay or mixed with pelleted rations at feeding. Although very effective if dosed correctly, their powdered formulation and bitter taste can make it difficult to ensure that each cow gets her required dose. Mag sulphate and chloride can also be placed in water sources. This is not as reliable, as cattle can bypass drinking troughs in the wet climate of a Circular Head winter.

There are also formulated, pelleted (grain) rations available from feed companies that will provide protection from hypocalcaemia if used as part of a lead feeding program. These products have anionic salts added eg magnesium chloride. Never use lactating cow pellets pre-calving as they usually contain products which predispose to milk fever eg sodium bicarb.

Critical points when feeding any of the above products are

- **Timing:** Feeding of anionic salts must commence **at least two weeks** prior to calving start date. Causmag should be started at least 4 weeks prior.
- **Dosage:** As recommended to enhance prevention. Excessive quantities of magnesium may actually increase the likelihood of milk fever.

Administration: Are the cows consuming their ration? Cows can avoid poorly applied or mixed products. Remember that these salts do not taste very good.

Adding a small quantity of molasses will improve palatability