

Nursing Downer Cows

The first step in treating a 'downer cow' correctly is to establish why she is down e.g. calving paralysis, back injury, unresponsive milk fever etc. Always seek veterinary advice if unsure of the cause or if you have treated the cow and she has not responded as you would have expected. With calving paralysis it is important to get veterinary attention early, ideally within 6 - 12 hours of her going down. Attention should also be sought in unresponsive milk fever cases in 2 - 4 hours after treatment. Appropriate or other treatment of the problem can then be administered and prognosis, i.e. likelihood and time to recovery can be estimated.

Once the initial therapy has been given, the next stage of treatment is nursing care. Nursing requires a lot of time, patience and is often very inconvenient, especially in the busy hype of calving season. However successful treatment and recovery of downer cows relies heavily on the quality and quantity of time spent with them.

Nursing tips:

- Feed and water should be easily accessible by the cow
- Protection from the weather-keep the cow warm and dry where possible. Use bales of hay and, or tarps, or where possible move her **safely** into a shed.
- Roll the cow at least 3 - 4 times a day to minimise muscle swelling and soreness and to allow better blood flow to the legs
- Lifting the cow will also aid blood flow, allow muscle movement and to an extent can be a form of "physiotherapy". Ideally use a cow jack. Hip clamps can be useful but beware of trauma caused by excessive or incorrect use. They should only be used for periods of a few minutes to determine the cow's ability to bear weight. Generally lift 2 - 3 times a day depending on her attempts to stand and the device you're using. Try to get her to take some of her own weight while supporting her body. Placement of hay bales around her as she stands will reduce likelihood trauma (e.g. dislocated hips) if she falls.
- Electrostimulation to stimulate nerve and muscle activity - do not forget this is not only part of the initial treatment but should be used in the nursing/recovery period.
- Milking. The cow may require once a day milking to relieve swelling/prevent mastitis. Use gloves and teat dips. Ideally place a clean towel / newspaper under her udder after milking to reduce teat canal contamination - it is important to remove this after ½ hour to stop urine/faeces pooling here.

- Never leave a 'downer' cow on a hard surface such as concrete or gravel. Deep compacted floor litter like sawdust (not loose hay) or a normal paddock surface in a protected area is best.
- All 'downer' cows should be assessed regularly for dislocated hips, fractures and other injuries.

It is important to note that if you cannot spend enough time with these cows, chances of recovery are often very low and the cost of initial treatment is wasted.