

Spring clean

It's time to treat your girls to a

Put a spring in your herd's step for the summer. Set aside some time to devise a hoof health plan to tackle digital dermatitis once and for all. A bit of 'pampering' now should pay dividends during next winter.

This is the time of year when a herd's digital dermatitis problem is usually at its peak. The disease has had a long, wet winter to do its worst – and it usually has – to your herds' health and welfare, and your business.

And now, as thoughts switch to turn out, is a good time to resolve to get on and make sure you tackle it head on during the spring and summer, according to Bristol Vet School's hoof specialist Nick Bell.

He says that the most recent research estimated that around 80% of UK herds had digital dermatitis, but he believes that in reality the figure is probably higher. "And each case costs producers around £80. This figure includes additional labour and treatment. Other hidden losses, arising from reduced milk yield and poor fertility, are more difficult to quantify.

"A cow with digital dermatitis can add an extra 20 days to her calving-to-first-service interval and other work has shown a 1.7% loss in milk yield," he says.

So, there are plenty of production and financial reasons to now turn your attention to feet, ready for turnout in a couple of months. "Feet are cleaner and drier when cows are outside and this makes the disease much easier to treat – the burden of infection is reduced," explains Dr Bell.

"And once you're on top of the disease you can then stop fire fighting and be proactive and devise and adhere to a winter-foot-care regime that should keep digital dermatitis at bay," he says, adding that the 'regime' should comprise regular foot bathing and keeping the feet as dry and slurry free as possible.

No pain

Formalin is still the foot bath solution of choice for many producers, despite the health and safety implications – it's a known carcinogen. Copper sulphate is popular too and there are also other products available.

One of these products, which is in use in more than 60 countries, is Hoof-fit Bath Liquid. It contains chelated zinc, aloe vera, organic acids, and alcohol. And the distributor, Quill Productions, claims that the disinfectant properties are as powerful, and far safer, than any comparable chemical such as formalin.

"Just as important as efficacy it that cows won't feel any pain from the foot bath solution when they walk through it – it's



those feet

well-earned pedicure – or three



Above: Tender hoof: digital dermatitis infection

Above right: Nick Bell: "Each case costs at least £80 to treat"

Left: A proactive paddle: regular foot bathing should help to keep digital dermatitis under control

gentle on the hoof," says the company's Ben Burgess. "You can handle the liquid at 100% concentration and feel no pain." Work carried out at Northern Ireland's Department of Agriculture and Rural Development estimated that the pain that a cow with digital dermatitis suffers after she walks through a 5% solution formalin bath can impact on her milk yield for up to 30 days.

"In addition to being gentle and killing bacteria on the hoof, the combination of zinc and aloe vera encourages fast and strong skin healing of skin.

"The healing properties of the chelated minerals and aloe vera are unique compared with any other foot-bathing chemical, and have a massive impact on preventing re-infection of wounds," says Mr Burgess.

This is one key reason why the Hoof-fit Bath Liquid is only used on a seven-to-ten day cycle during 'normal' conditions, as opposed to every day when using formalin.

The liquid is recommended for use at between 2% and 3% solution. "When 4.5 litres are diluted with 180 litres of water, up to 500 cows can be treated. During an increased occurrence of foot infection, treatment should be increased to three or four consecutive days," adds Mr Burgess.

Cow 'pedicure'

Somerset-based foot trimmer, and vice chairman of the National Association of Cattle Hoof Trimmers (NACFT), Steve Simmons is a fan of this foot bathing liquid.

"The solution has a nice, creamy base – it conditions the feet. Not only do they look good and are disease free, but the cow gets a bit of a pedicure," he says.

As with any footbath though, he stresses that it will only

Gel soothes and heals infected feet



Steve Simmons

Steve Simmons has been foot trimming across the UK for the past 14 years, lifting the feet of more than 300 cows a week – that's around 15,000 each year.

And one of the key tools in his hoof trimming kit is the Hoof-fit gel, which he says can't be beaten when it comes to tackling digital dermatitis head on. "It works both quickly and effectively and I wouldn't use anything else," he says. "I dealt with a very rotten foot just the other week. I cleaned it up, spread on some gel and bandaged it up to keep it clean. And within just a few days it was well on its way to healing completely and the cow was much happier on her feet."

The manufacturer of the range supplies

Steve, and all members of the NACFT, with the gel in a cartridge. "This means that I can squeeze the gel into all the nooks and crannies in a cow's foot and I'm not messing around with pots when I'm treating a large number of animals. It's much cleaner and more convenient and it's an essential part of my hoof trimming kit. And it's cheaper than antibiotics," he adds.

Steve has been using the range since 2007. He began using the range himself after seeing a demonstration at the 2007 European foot trimming conference, which was held at Reaseheath College.

"We saw 12 lame cows treated with the gel and two days later we got to see the results. In just 48 hours there was virtually no sign of digital dermatitis on the treated cows' feet."

Gel helps healing



work if it's used correctly and according to the manufacturer's instructions. "It's worrying just how many of my customers don't read, or just ignore, the instructions."

"Cleanliness is the key. If the footbath solution and the cows' feet are dirty then it won't work – it's as simple as that. And feet have to be free from slurry and dirt before they walk through the footbath and should be allowed to dry out a little and remain free of slurry for 10 minutes or so after treatment.

"I like to see cows running through a pre-wash water bath to clean their feet, then through the treatment bath and then standing on a nice clean yard for at least five minutes," he adds.

Overall condition

Mr Simmons recommended the foot bath liquid to Bridgewater-based producer Matt Hilton. He runs a 350-cow herd, averaging 10,000 litres, at Manor Farm, in Otterhampton, and used to struggle with a niggling digital dermatitis problem.

"We had been using formalin, but because it's not a nice product to handle we weren't foot bathing as often or as thoroughly as we should have done.

"I gave the Hoof-fit liquid a go after chatting to Steve at the Dairy Show. It had to be kinder than formalin – it must be awful to walk through if your feet are sore – but I wondered if it would be effective."

Mr Hilton was right about the gentleness of the product: "The cows are keen to walk through it. I think they'd stand in it all day if they could," he says.

And as for efficacy he says so far so good – he's been using it for three months, and already feet are

considerably better, both in terms of digital dermatitis infection and overall condition.

"It's certainly much better than the other products that I've used so far, which I'd expect since it is also slightly more expensive. But the additional cost is well worth it – the cost of lameness caused by digital dermatitis is considerably more. There are fewer cows limping around and that means less time lifting feet and dealing with lame cows. That's a cost saving in itself."

Which ever product or solution you use, feet have to be clean before cows walk through the foot bath, stresses Nick Bell.

"And it doesn't matter what kind of bath you use. What's crucial is that it's easy to use, which means it's easy to empty, clean and refill – that way regular foot bathing becomes a job that's done, rather than one that's avoided or put off."

A wide footbath is required if cows are running through it before milking, which is the ideal because it avoids 'udder splash' onto open teats after milking, but not always practical. And it should be at least three metres long to ensure that all four feet are fully immersed at least twice.

"And consider where your cows are going to walk and stand after footbathing. Sending cows straight back to a slurry-filled shed or through a muddy gateway will undo your efforts," says Dr Bell. "Clean yards and passageways, and well-maintained cow tracks and pasture gateways are all an essential part of improving and maintaining hoof health."

Rachael Porter