

Part 2: If It's Not Milk Fever, What Is It?

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 This article is the second in a three-part series discussing down cows. This article explores more reasons of why a cow may be down. Watch for the last article in an upcoming issue that examines treatment options. Dippel is a veterinarian with Lancaster Veterinary Associates, Salunga.

SALUNGA (Lancaster Co.) — Thus far we have covered the most common cause of cows being down. Now, let's say that the dairy producer is positive that it is not milk fever, or has given her a bottle of calcium in the vein and she still won't get up.

There are three likely possibilities as to why she is still down.

If she is recently fresh, chances are she is down due to calving paralysis (calving paralysis usually results from a big calf coming through the birth canal and compressing the obturator or sciatic nerve inside the canal).

If she had milk fever, and was down for a long time, possibly



After being assisted her to get up, she stands with one of her fetlocks buckled forward. When she walks, both buckle forward. This is a classic symptom of "calving paralysis."

overnight, she probably is down due to pressure necrosis of muscle or nerve damage in her legs.

If she is not recently fresh, and did not have milk fever recently, she would most likely be down from trauma, i.e. falling on the cement, etc. Whether or not one of these is more likely than the others depends on the history of the cow and the circumstances the cow is in.

All three of these can be put under the category of muscle/nerve damage, or paralysis. But before producers assume that it is muscle/nerve damage, they first must rule out other disease processes.

Simple Observations

This may be determined by simple observations, her history, and by examining the cow. One of the best ways to determine if something else is causing her to be down, other than muscle/nerve damage, is if she is eating or drinking.

This assumes that there is fresh water and feed in front of her. If she is down she can't make it to the water feeder or the bunk, it must be brought to her.

If she is eating and drinking normally this will rule out many other disease processes, and point toward muscle/nerve damage as the probable cause.

For example, if a cow is down from heat stress in the summer, she will not be interested in eating, not to mention her temperature usually is sky high (greater than 105).

If she has suffered severe blood loss, her eyes will be sunken and she will most likely not be interested in eating until you correct her dehydration.

If she has nervous ketosis, it is possible to smell ketones on her breath, and she most likely will not be eating normally. As there are many potential possibilities, veterinary assistance might be needed in

helping you determine what the problem is, as well as advice about the prognosis for the future.

For example, diagnosing spinal cord cancer can be difficult because cows usually will still eat when they first go down. Sometimes broken legs can be difficult to diagnose depending on where the fracture is or if there is a lot of swelling in the area. Fractured pelvises are not too common, but they should be checked for as well.

If the producer or the veterinarian has not been able to find any obvious cause as to why she is down, then she may be down from muscle/nerve damage, whatever the initial reason — a hard calving, too long of recumbency from milk fever, or trauma.

Sometimes the cause is obviously muscle/nerve damage and it is not hard to diagnose. For example, the cow had an extremely difficult calving, or the dairy producer saw her go down in the freestall when she was being ridden by another cow.

If there is no history that can be depended on, then prodding her lower extremities is one way to help with diagnosis. If the producer prods her and she has no response, then there is a good chance she has nerve damage.

However, many times they will still be responsive, and yet they cannot rise to their feet.

Also, if she favors one leg while attempting to get up, this is a clue that she might have muscle/nerve damage in that leg.

Keep Treating?

If the producer or the veterinarian determines that muscle/nerve damage is likely, they are now faced with a decision — should the producer spend time and money on treating her, or send her to a down cow renderer?

Since dairymen nowadays do not receive much money anymore for down cows, they are slightly more

willing to try and save her. However, there are some good renderers that will do it on the farm, and the dairymen can use the meat for themselves.

Whether or not the meat will be good, and what she has been treated with, are certainly factors in deciding on this option. The extent of her muscle/nerve damage should be one of the factors in deter-

mining if treatment should be tried.

If the cow makes no attempt whatsoever to get up, and she has no feeling in either of her legs, than treating her might not be the best option. If she can almost rise to her feet getting of the way up, then treatment would probably be worthwhile. Anything in between can make it a difficult decision to make.

The value of the cow should also be a factor in considering whether or not to treat, as well as the time the dairyman has available to spend on her.

Treating down cows properly can be a big time commitment. If treatment is decided as the course to take, there are many things that a dairyman can do to give her a better chance of standing on her own.

The very first thing to do is to make sure she is on soft ground or in a well bedded area or manure pack. A mattress in a stall is soft enough, but it is not ideal because of the restraints and confinement of the stall which can make it difficult for her to attempt to get up when she finally does try.

This is especially true in a tie-stall barn because of the risk of the cow sliding back into the gutter, which is one of the worst situations a cow can get herself in.

Not On Cement

A boxstall with cement as the floor with one inch of shavings on it is not soft ground. If the cow can dig herself down to the cement in a pen, move her someplace else. None of her body should be touching cement — this simple fact is very important in down cow treatment.

Down cows should not be on cement, and the sooner the cow gets her off the cement, the better her chances of getting up are. This should be one of the first priorities with a down cow.

The longer she is down on the cement, the worse her prognosis is with each passing hour. There are many ways to move a cow, but it is preferable to push her on a gate or a big board and pull that, rather than drag the cow. Be very careful of her teats when doing this.

If she is down outside on pasture, make sure she is protected from the elements, with a canopy in the summer to protect her from the sun, and a windbreak in the winter.

After she is someplace comfortable, make sure she has feed and water in front of her. Hopefully there are not other cows around that might spill or drink her water.

A big, low, tub for the water is ideal, as five gallon buckets tend to spill and are sometimes hard for down cows to drink out of.



After she is moved slowly to dry ground, the cow has much better footing, and is less likely to slip and fall and damage herself further.

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