

# Northwest Veterinary Associates Newsletter

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## Prefresh Management is Key for Success after Calving

Much has been written about the importance of the transition cow diet and its affect on health and milk production in the subsequent lactation. Rations properly balanced for net energy, DCAD, digestible fiber, and trace mineral levels are critical to these animals. Yet, why is it that some herds that apparently “get it right” nutritionally still have their share of problems, while others, who may not pay as much attention to the transition diet, have few fresh cow issues. Perhaps there is more than meets the eye (or the mouth) when it comes to getting our postcalving animals off to good starts.

Data gathered by the Production Medicine Group at the University of Wisconsin support the view that management changes around calving time are critical to fresh cow health and production. The focus of investigations of fresh cow problems has shifted from the ration toward assessment of management factors including the transition cow environment and the pen moves that animals are subjected to within a very short period of time around calving.

Housing accommodations for prefresh cows and heifers are frequently suboptimal. Stall size is typically too small, especially for springing mature cattle where girths are larger due to

pregnancy status. It is now recommended that stall width be 54 inches on center. For this reason, as well as having lower dry matter intakes (DMI), and being lower on the “pecking order totem pole”, heifers should be housed as a separate group with more conventional 48” stalls.

It is commonly thought that because these cows are not lactating and DMI is lower, the close-up group can be overcrowded relative to feed bunk space. Research and field observations are telling us that this is not the case. Trials show that as stocking rates increase, DMI goes down. Some have shown that there is a 6.5 lb per day increase in milk production over the first 80 days of lactation in first lactation animals stocked at 80% with respect to stalls, compared to overstocking at 120%.

Cows are allelomimetic, which means that they prefer to do the same as those nearby. If we design our facilities so that cows can behave as they would in their natural setting, then it makes sense to allow them access to feed so that all cows eat at the same time. A minimum of 28” of bunk space is therefore recommended for the pre-fresh group. If construction of a transition facility is being contemplated, a two or four-row barn would be the way to go, so that animals would have at least 24 inches of bunk space at 100% stall capacity. In