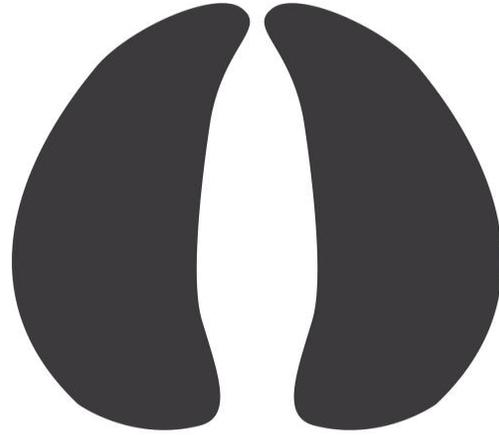




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HEIFER HOOVES NEED TLC, TOO

BY MEGAN KUHLW, PHD



Hoof health is a critical component to the overall well being of all dairy cattle in any type of production system. Lameness is a costly disease, with 20 to 25 percent of dairy cows in North America experiencing lameness issues. From little feet to big feet, keeping hooves healthy the whole way through is key!

Nearly all (95 percent) of hoof problems occur in the hind feet, according to Karl Burgi, director and instructor at Dairyland Hoof Care Institute. Three types of hoof lesions are responsible for the majority of problems: sole ulcers, white line disease, and digital dermatitis (DD).

The University of Wisconsin and Cornell University characterized the cost of lameness and found lameness resulted in 28 extra days open and about 750 pounds of lost milk production for the lactation in which the lameness occurs. Also, once a cow develops lameness, regardless of the cause of the lesion, she is at a much greater risk for developing the same lesion in the next lactation.

Paying close attention to the feet and legs in the milking herd is very important. Equal importance needs to be paid to the heifers.

The lifelong consequences of lameness are clearly illustrated with digital dermatitis (DD). For cows that did not have any DD events during the rearing phase, the likelihood of developing DD during the 1st lactation was 13.7%. The rate increased with each DD event an animal had as a heifer. There was a 45.6% incidence of developing DD during the 1st lactation for those that experienced one DD event as a heifer. This rose to 67.6% incidence of DD development during the 1st lactation for those that experienced two or more cases of DD as heifers.

Fortunately, over the years, research and observations on DD have led to several recommendations to lessen the impact of the

disease. Good heifer hygiene, dry housing, sound nutrition, and routine footbaths have proven successful in heifers to help control digital dermatitis.

However, a new condition is emerging in herds where lameness in heifers hadn't typically been a concern. The heifer hoof issue affects the inner claw of the foot and can often present like a thin sole issue once the animal enters the milking herd.

Dr. Nigel Cook, with the University of Wisconsin's School of Veterinary Medicine, has been increasingly observing this lameness syndrome in heifers and first lactation cows in herds that have lameness under control. Recently, Dr. Cook presented his findings at the UW-Extension's "Better cows, better heifers" seminars and at the PDPW Business Conference. Upon close inspection the syndrome looks like corkscrew claw syndrome with a corkscrew shape to both the front and rear medial claw, wide legged walking, and shifting weight from rear legs to front legs, which leads to widening of the front toes.

In 2017, Dr. Cook surveyed 43 herds to identify common risk factors and he concluded that "what's good for cows, and how we have learned to manage cows, isn't necessarily good for heifers". The condition does not get better with age as it impacts the skeleton and it is painful.

There were six common risks factors that Dr. Cook identified. These included:

1. Freestall housing with sand bedding, particularly coarse, recycled sand (does not appear to be a problem on bedded packs).
2. Headlocks. "An animal that is pushing against the headlocks puts an enormous force on its front and back feet as it tries to reach for feed," noted Dr. Cook.

3. Limit feeding strategies. Limit feeding leads to aggressive feeding behaviors and causes heifers to push even harder against the headlocks for feed.

4. Overstocking

5. Grooved concrete

6. Hoof trimming practices where the axial wall in the toe region is removed.

If your herd is dealing with this syndrome, a few suggestions for improvement include:

1. Deep bed stalls with something other than sand

2. Limit the use of grooved concrete or add rubber flooring at the feed bunks

3. Use a post and rail feeding system when possible

4. Feed to a greater refusal rate with frequent push ups

5. Avoid trimming the axial wall.

Overall, remember to take a good look at your hoof trimming program and ask these two questions

1. Is there sufficient trimming to meet the stated goal for the herd?

2. Is the trimming beneficial to the cow or heifer?

Every hoof trimming program should focus on the prevention of lameness and not the treatment of lameness. "Good hoof health often depends on how the hoof is trimmed and the timing of that trim. Timed trimming is functional trimming at the most advantageous times in order to optimize claw health and prevent lameness", says Karl Burgi.

Every cow and heifer should enter her critical calving period with healthy balanced feet. Hoof trimming should restore a more upright claw angle and balance the weight distribution between the inner and outer claw (Figure 1 below).



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A standard recommendation from hoof trimming experts is for each cow to be evaluated for trimming at least twice during each lactation, usually at dry-off and a trim between 60 and 150 days in milk. Springing heifers should be trimmed between 10 and 3 weeks prior to calving. Work closely with your hoof trimmer, veterinarian, and nutritionist to make sure all aspects of your program are components in preventing lameness rather than contributing risk factors.

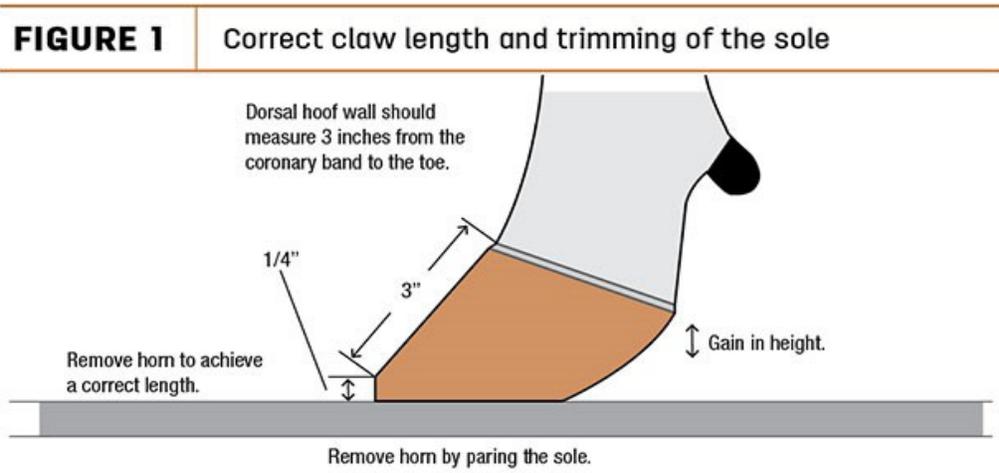


Figure 1 – Figure from Progressive Dairyman, 11/4/2016, Dr. Nigel Cook.