



CONSIDER SHORTER, SINGLE-GROUP DRY PERIODS FOR MANAGING HYPOCALCEMIA

BY KEN ZANZALARI



THERE'S BEEN A TREND ON DAIRY FARMS TO IMPLEMENT shorter, single-group dry cow programs for 40 to 45 days, instead of the traditional two-group dry cow program. The benefits to shortening the dry period for dairy cows may include:

- Higher milk production since cows stay in milk longer
- Less labor as a result of reduced number of rations fed to dry cows
- Larger loads of dry cow TMRs, resulting in more proper mixing of dry cow rations
- Less cow stress and labor with fewer pen moves during the dry period

These factors, individually and collectively, can result in enhanced transition cow health and performance, which may lead to greater economic returns. To determine if this management alternative will work for your dairy, consider the following questions:

1) Do cows need a 60-day dry period?

Several research studies have demonstrated that some cows do not need a 60-day dry period. In fact, research demonstrates that cows only need a minimum of 30 days dry, although it is not recommended to go less than 40 days dry.

2) What are the benefits of feeding one dry cow ration?

Feeding one ration simplifies the dry cow nutrition program since this allows for more uniform mixing and delivery of the prepartum ration, a ration which often includes more expensive ingredients and/or additives that have low feeding rates.

3) What are the benefits of fewer pen moves?

Research indicates that frequent pen moves result in more displacements at the feed bunk resulting in lower feed intake. Reducing feed intake in prepartum dairy cows typically results in impaired fresh cow health and production.

4) How does feeding a negative DCAD diet factor into shorter dry periods?

Regardless of the length of the dry period, feeding a negative DCAD diet is critical to managing both clinical and subclinical hypocalcemia. Fully acidify the diet between a DCAD of -10 to -15 mEq/100g for a minimum of 21 days prepartum. Several research studies have demonstrated that a negative DCAD diet can be fed safely for up to 45 days.

5) Will feeding a negative DCAD diet for the entire dry period generate a positive return on investment?

Benefits of feeding a negative DCAD diet throughout the entire dry period may include increased milk yield, reduced early post-partum metabolic disorders, retained placentas and metritis. Increased income from milk sales from extending lactation can further improve a dairy's return on this investment, especially for herds with high milk yield during periods of high milk prices.

6) Is this an acceptable approach for my dairy?

Utilizing a shortened dry period and feeding a negative DCAD diet can be an alternative approach to managing dry cow health, milk production and profitability.

To determine whether this strategy is right for your dairy, evaluate the pros and cons of this dry cow management strategy and continue this conversation with your veterinarian, nutritional advisor and key farm personnel. A shorter, single-group dry cow program, coupled with feeding a negative DCAD diet, may result in a healthier herd, simpler feeding program, higher milk production and greater profitability. 🐄

Ken Zanzalari, Ph.D., Dipl. ACAN is an ARPAS board-certified nutritionist with Prince Agri Products, Inc. specializing in transition cow management and nutrition. He can be contacted at Ken.Zanzalari@princeagri.com or 217-257-8116.