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## DIGITAL DERMATITIS

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A single case of digital dermatitis has been calculated to cost around £30-50 off the bottom line in reduced milk yield and increased days to conception. Controlling the condition effectively can give a return on investment of around 200%.

### 'Magic' cure

Imagine this: someone tells you that they have a new magic cure for digital dermatitis. It costs just £2.50, and there is no milk withhold. You are assured that if you use it on every fresh case, you would be able to virtually eliminate it from your herd in just 6 months. Most farmers would agree you would be foolish not to snap their hand off!

And yet this “magic cure” does exist - 10-15 minutes of a herds person's time (costing around £2.50) in lifting the affected foot, thoroughly cleaning the digital dermatitis lesion with dry paper towel or cotton wool, followed by application of a suitable topical antibiotic will cure digital dermatitis.

More severe cases may require repeat treatments after 2-3 days to combat the infection, and some advanced cases can be complicated by infection of the deeper tissues requiring antibiotic injections. Since some cows are prone to re-infection, it is important to keep on at these cows, as well as instituting preventative foot-bathing for future control.



Increasingly, farmers and herdspeople are finding themselves under more pressure for time. This can make the prospect of treating digital dermatitis lesions individually a daunting task, especially if a high proportion of the herd is affected. However, on farms where efforts have been made, then the rewards are a very low incidence of the disease which is easily controlled by regular use of non-antibiotic footbaths.

Farmers should embark on this course of individual treatment by having an initial “blitz” on the worst cases, using a qualified foot-trimmer to help if necessary. If this is coupled with the use of antibiotic footbaths over 3-4 consecutive days, which will treat early and minor lesions, the situation should quickly become more manageable.

**Digital Dermatitis - ignore it at your cost!**

### Risk factors

Aggressive treatment is not the only area to look at where there is a severe digital dermatitis problem. Some farms are plagued by digital dermatitis, despite good treatment regimes - the reason lies behind some farms having greater risk factors. The biggest risk factor for digital dermatitis is contact of the feet with slurry. This is why winter housing is associated with a higher incidence on many farms.

Measures need to be taken to keep cows' feet as clean as possible. For some farms, the solution may partly lie in increasing the frequency and effectiveness of scraping yards and passageways, whilst for others, daily disinfectant foot-bathing may be necessary. However, farmers should be realistic about what limited foot-bathing can achieve - it isn't enough to just run cows with dirty feet through a foot-bath once a fortnight and expect the problem to be under control.

### Footbathing

Each farm needs to use footbaths on an individual basis: you can't necessarily take a one-size fits all approach when it comes to foot-bathing. Although there is no licensed antibiotic for digital dermatitis, antibiotic foot-bath solutions can be prescribed which will help control the disease. They should be used early on when there is a problem so that non-

antibiotic solutions can then be used effectively in the longer term. Either copper sulphate or formalin are commonly used, and both of these solutions stand up to a fair bit of contamination with organic matter without losing their effectiveness, unlike the antibiotic baths.

Whatever footbath solution is used, it is important that foot-bathing does not interfere with normal flow of cow traffic. With a disease like digital dermatitis, this is as much about discussing the practicalities of how best to use foot baths, as it is the knowledge of which antibiotics work to treat it. If foot bathing isn't a smooth operation for the cows and the farmer, it won't get done.

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