

Put a spring in your step

Producers pay a lot of care and attention to cows' hooves. But what about their own feet? We spoke a physiotherapist and a parlour-pit mat supplier to find out why personal 'hoof care' is a vital part of running an efficient and productive business.

TEXT RACHAEL PORTER

Cold, hard concrete. Dairy producers know it's not good for their cows' feet, yet they too often spend a significant proportion of their working day standing on – and sometimes even jumping from a height on to – it. Just like their cows, this can leave them vulnerable to 'lameness' and other knee, hip and back problems. And, depending on its severity, these health issues can also have catastrophic consequences for the dairy business.

Gloucestershire-based physiotherapist Clare Woodward should know. With more than 20 years of experience in 'foot-care', she is also a producer's daughter. "It really is a case of 'no foot, no farmer'," she explains. "Standing and walking on concrete for long periods – and jumping off tractors and down from the collecting yard and into the parlour pit – particularly in ill-fitting or unsupportive footwear, will, at the very least, result in excessive pronation of the foot. "This often means that the arch of the foot collapses and rolls inwards," she explains. As the feet pronate, there is excessive biomechanical stress placed on the joints and soft tissues in the foot. And this can result in a number of painful conditions in the foot itself, such as bunions, corns, plantar fasciitis (a tightening of the soft tissues in the sole of the foot) and metatarsalgia (inflammation of the metatarsal joints at the front of the foot).

"Compensatory misalignment can then also occur throughout the rest of the musculoskeletal system, which can cause ankle, shin, knee, hip and even lower back pain," adds Miss Woodward.

The good news is that, just as in dairy cows, 'lameness'

is preventable. And it does not need to involve a cattle crush or a vet. The key focus here is investing in and wearing the correct footwear.

"Producers wear Wellingtons for extremely long periods throughout the working day – not great footwear when it comes to looking after your feet because most don't have a good, supportive foot bed.

"It's vital to invest in a good pair of boots that support the foot. Ideally, producers should be wearing boots with a foot bed that holds the joints of the foot in a good biomechanical position," she explains, adding that producers should think of their footwear as a piece of essential person protective equipment (PPE) – just as they would steel toe caps if they were working with heavy machinery. "Supportive boots will optimise the position of the foot and prevent foot conditions from occurring, as well as optimising the position of the ankles, knees, hips and pelvis."

False economy

"It's a false economy to balk at the price of a decent pair of Wellingtons. The cost of physiotherapy, or even surgery and time off, will far exceed the cost of even the most expensive boots. So invest in your feet – look after yourself," Miss Woodward says. "Make sure your boots are the correct size, they're not too wide, and they offer support and cushioning to both the arch of the foot and the heel.

"And don't wait to change them when they're split and letting in water. Replace them when they start to wear and you feel that they no longer offer maximum foot support," she says. "Remember, runners don't wait for their trainers to fall apart before they replace them – they know that after so many miles they should be replaced, as the shock absorption and support begins to diminish. It's the same for Wellingtons. Buy some that put a spring in your step and, when you can't feel that anymore, throw them away and buy a new pair." And she says that producers should take every opportunity that they can to change into different footwear throughout the working day.

Paul Butland:
"How much time do you spend standing on concrete?"



Foot support: invest in boots that will protect your feet and mobility



Parlour matting: additional support and insulation

"Something like a pair of leather drilling boots would be ideal. Anything that's supportive, breathable and easier to walk in than Wellingtons. Again, it takes just moments to change your boots – so make time for yourself and make it part of your routine."

The number-one condition in 'Wellington wearers', and indeed anyone spending prolonged periods on their feet in inadequate footwear, is something called 'turf toe' – the inflammation of what's known as the PIP joint in the big toe. "This is caused by over use, which occurs if the boots are the incorrect size – typically they'll be too big or too wide," she says.

Plantar fasciitis – inflammation of the sole of the foot – would be the next most common complaint and is the result of inadequate arch support.

Another common condition in boot wearers is called Achilles tendonitis – also known as policeman's heel. This results when there's no cushioning or support under the heel.

Concrete 'cushioning'

Mats in the parlour pit can also be extremely beneficial – both in terms of providing cushioning and warmth – in protecting producers' feet and skeletal system. Intershape's Paul Butland says that his Northamptonshire-based company is seeing a steady increase in sales of parlour-pit matting each year: "And it's mostly as a result of producers making enquiries about mats for the cows in the parlour. It gets them thinking about how much time they also spend standing on concrete."

He says that there's also a mixture of producers who are fitting mats as a 'reaction' to their own foot problems: "But the majority only think about footwear if they're having an issue with their feet, knees, hips or backs. Matting can also be an important piece of the PPE puzzle, when it comes to spending a lot of time standing and walking around on concrete."

The mats are typically around 25mm thick and made of material, predominantly EVA, that offers support and

insulation, as well as being non-slip and resistant to dairy chemicals, slurry and urine.

"These mats should last for around 10 years, depending on the level of wear. Clearly a mat in a rotary parlour, where the operator stands in the same place for long periods, will show a greater level of wear than a mat in a herringbone set up.

"And using peracetic acid for cluster washing can also reduce the lifespan of the mats. But they're well worth the investment in terms of operator comfort and skeletal health."

Supportive footwear

Coupled with well-fitting and supportive footwear, the mat should offer cushioning that's akin to wearing sports trainers in the parlour. "Jumping down into the pit, and standing and walking on concrete puts stress on feet and legs. And cold concrete in the winter just exacerbates the issue. Insulation not only makes life more comfortable for the milker, but can also aid better circulation.

"Put it this way – I've never had a producer complain about a parlour pit mat," adds Mr Butland. "Most, once they've had matting fitted, wonder why they didn't do it before. And I'm sure it goes a long way to making the whole milking process 'easier' and more pleasant. And that, foot health aside, has to help with operator efficiency and overall performance." |



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