Get on the 'Front Foot' with Lameness Control

November 2026

As the nights start to draw in and more cattle come indoors, it's a good time to take stock of foot health in your herd and identify where best to direct your time and attention to keep lameness at bay over the housing period.

Screening the herd – what's my current situation?



The prevalence of lameness in beef cattle has been reported as roughly 8.3% in finishing cattle and 14.2% in suckler cows. However, lameness often starts as a very subtle change and in a beef set-up it can be tricky to detect these animals until the problem becomes more advanced. The absolute cornerstone of lameness control is ***early detection and prompt intervention*** - so how do we identify animals in the early stages of lameness?

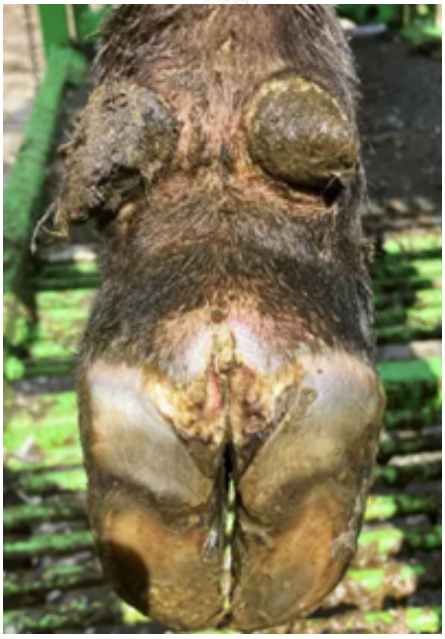
Make use of any cattle gathering (such as TB testing, group changes or management tasks) to watch individual animals walk un-hurried on a hard surface and mobility score them. This is a score from 0-3 which rates their gait and allows you to generate a list of animals to investigate. There are plenty of resources and videos online to train yourself in mobility scoring; alternatively, ask one of our vets or vet-techs to show you! By taking a small amount of time to focus purely on the way a cow walks, you can pick out very subtle changes that may have otherwise gone un-noticed until the problem became more progressed.

Mobility Score	Description	Suggested Action
0	Walks with even weight-bearing and rhythm on all four feet, with a flat back. Long, fluid strides possible.	None
1	Steps uneven (rhythm or weight-bearing) or strides shortened. Affected limb(s) not immediately or consistently identifiable.	Monitor. Inspect foot when and if required.
2	Uneven weight-bearing on a limb that is immediately and consistently identifiable and/or obviously shortened strides (possibly with an arch to the centre of the back). Signs used to identify affected limbs include: uneven dewclaw descent, uneven rhythm of strides, uneven leg speed, shortened strides, head nod and a lowered head carriage.	Requires examination. Foot should be lifted to allow identification of lesion(s) and appropriate treatment. New cases should be attended to within 48 hours.
3	An identifiable uneven weight-bearing, as for score 2, and their normal walking speed is affected (slower). Unable to walk as fast as the most mobile cow in the herd due to impaired mobility. Identifying a painful limb may be difficult if multiple limbs are involved. Likely to fall behind the rest of the herd and stops for rests if walking a reasonable distance.	Requires urgent attention, nursing and further professional advice. Examine and treat as soon as possible. Should not be made to walk far and should be kept on a straw yard or at grass.

I have identified some animals with impaired mobility – now what?

Identified animals should be safely restrained and have their foot lifted to allow accurate identification of the lesion. This allows for more effective, targeted treatment for the individual but by identifying lesion trends, we can also target any preventative measures on a group-level to the specific lameness type, therefore concentrating time, effort and available funds on the factors that will really make the biggest difference on your farm.

For example, if we detect a high prevalence of infectious lameness such as Foul in the foot or Digital Dermatitis, we may focus more on biosecurity, foot bathing regimes and hygiene. In contrast, if we saw lots of non-infectious causes such as Sole Bruising or White Line Disease, we may look more towards housing comfort, floor surfaces, stocking rates and cow flow within sheds/handling systems.



Digital Dermatitis lesion



White Line Disease

I want to improve my facilities to allow me to intervene quickly

Not everybody has the latest foot trimming crush at their disposal on-farm! However, it will be possible to have a system in place which allows you to safely lift the foot of a lame animal without undue delay. This may involve…

- **Animal Health and Welfare Pathway** funding to identify suitable equipment for your farm and contribute to costs. This funding can also be used to attend a **foot trimming course -** we run a range of courses to suit your needs.

- **Foot trimmer with a mobile crush** – a routine, planned visit off the back of a regular mobility score will be more effective and economical than waiting until there is a big enough ‘list’ of lame cattle – by which point, chronic foot problems can become very difficult to resolve and welfare may be impaired.



Lesion identification is crucial to success

Main success points to consider at housing



- **Biosecurity (infectious lameness)**
    - Source bought-in stock carefully to avoid bringing in infectious lameness such as Digital Dermatitis
    - Foot bathing at housing will disinfect feet and reduce spread between animals. Further foot bathing may be required if infectious challenge is high
    - Practice good hygiene between groups/sheds

There is a link between Digital Dermatitis and CODD in sheep, so carefully consider shared grazing, particularly with tack sheep

- **Housing**
    - Adequate, comfortable lying areas will reduce standing times
    - Hard surfaces should provide grip and be free from damage, which can exert uneven pressure on the foot and cause skin abrasions, which may act as a starting point for infection
    - Wet conditions and slurry pooling has a huge impact on hoof quality and disease spread. Ensure hard surfaces have adequate water run-off, are regularly scraped and bedding is kept dry
- **Stocking rates suitable to the number and size of cattle** - important to reduce competition related injuries, infection build-up and allow all animals to lie down
- **Handling systems and tracks** – moving cattle should be low stress and allow an easy flow of animals to reduce injury and foot damage
- **Feeding and nutrition**
    - High concentrate diets can be associated with laminitis and ruminal acidosis, which can directly impact the hoof and cause loose faeces, contributing to sub-optimal shed hygiene. Ensure diet changes are gradual, feed is properly mixed and feed regularly to avoid gorging on cake
    - Vitamin/mineral levels in the diet will directly impact hoof health and limb development in growing cattle



After the dry summer, now is a good time to Body Condition Score your sucklers to inform decisions around weaning and supplementary feeding before cows are brought onto concrete. Thin cows are more prone to sole lesions as they have less fat cushioning in the foot.



Henry