

Heifers and mastitis: No way to start her milking career

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For 22 months, you have been feeding her, observing her for sickness, growth, and estrus. The day is finally here, she calves without assistance, delivers a heifer calf, and is in the parlor for her first milking. Except...she has clinical mastitis, or worse, a blank quarter! Her milking career may be over before it even starts. What went wrong?

Heifer mastitis is an expensive disease and its costs include lost milk production, premature culling, additional labor, management, drugs, risk of residue, and production of nonsaleable milk. Heifer mastitis can be classified as clinical or subclinical. Bacteria most often implicated in heifer mastitis includes coagulase-negative staphylococcus, *Staphylococcus aureus*, and *Mycoplasma*. Types of environmental *Streptococcus* can also cause mastitis in heifers.

How do you know if you have a problem with heifer mastitis? Some researchers suggest that a heifer mastitis problem exists if greater than 15% of first-lactation heifers have clinical mastitis or if greater than 15% of all first-lactation heifers have a first test-day SCC above 150,000 (in the first 35 DIM). Herds exceeding these thresholds should examine factors affecting heifer mastitis and consider prevention and control measures.

The following are interventions that may help prevent and control heifer mastitis:

1. Improve udder health at farm level to decrease udder pathogen exposure from older cows to heifers. Consider separating first-lactation animals from older cows.
2. House young and pregnant heifers in a clean, hygienic environment and keep separate from cows.
3. Control cross-suckling in youngstock; this may include the use of calf weaner nose devices.
4. Use an effective fly control system.
5. Work with your nutritionist to make sure mineral, vitamin, and other nutritional needs are being met.
6. Manage the transition period to avoid a negative energy balance and disease before and after calving.
7. Minimize stress at calving time by avoiding movement of heifers already in labor.
8. When high risk of environmental mastitis exists in the pre/peripartum period, consider use of internal teat sealants prepartum +/- intramammary antibiotic therapy. Consult your veterinarian about this option as this should only be used as a short-term protocol.