

The Downer Cow
ALTERNATIVE VETERINARY MEDICINE CENTRE
Article WS124/07
Christopher Day - Veterinary Surgeon

Copyright © 2007 AVMC

Chinham House, Stanford in the Vale, Oxon SN7 8NQ UK

01367 710324

This is a page from www.alternativevet.org

The Downer Cow – A Natural Medicine Perspective

Which dairy farmer has not experienced the unfortunate and unpleasant experience of a downer cow? It is a truly regrettable and distressing experience and one we all want to avoid, if possible and that's only looking at our own response and feelings towards the situation. How much worse the cow must feel.

The problem appears to be one of a relatively heavy and awkward animal for its muscular system coupled with some circumstance which disables the muscular system to a varying extent. The result is an immovable object (its weight) as far as the cow is concerned. If the surface upon which she is recumbent is also less than perfect, then that robs her of confidence, makes her less able to obtain the grip to shift her weight and limbs as she requires for standing and may cause injury. This latter, alone, can be the reason for failure to save such cows.

All the possible causes for recumbency in cows are well known. Milk fever, back injury, calving injury, slipping on concrete, toxic mastitis etc. Always make a habit of checking the udder in recumbent cows, to ensure that mastitis is neither the cause nor an opportune secondary infection, as a result of recumbency. Many a toxic mastitis has been wrongly treated for milk fever, for long enough to deprive it of a chance of recovery. Colostrum in a fresh calved cow should be sticky. If the secretion is watery, even if it looks like colostrum, suspect mastitis.

It is constructive to look at possible means of rescuing downer cows and of prevention if such a thing is a feasibility.

When a cow is 'down', everything must be done to ensure that she is lying comfortably on a satisfactory stone-free surface. For preference this would be a firm soil or pasture surface, otherwise 'deep litter' straw bedding which is not 'holed' and which does not go down to bare concrete. Concrete is a disaster as a lying surface. In the case of a freshly-down cow on slippery concrete, in whom

any medical problems have been ascertained and sorted, (e.g. milk fever) then a fine sprinkling of very fine sand on the surface of the concrete can work wonders to help her to grip and to give her confidence (**N.B.** sand can be abrasive, if she struggles on it). If she cannot be brought to her feet in a short time (½ hour) then she should be moved gently and carefully (e.g. in a front loader or tractor box or on a gate), to a suitable surface, with adequate protection from extremes of weather. She should be made comfortable. Clean water and quality hay should be brought to her and positioned accessibly. She should be properly protected from her companions, so that she is neither harassed nor trodden nor robbed of food. She should be nursed properly and dung accumulation should be prevented. Hoisting methods can be tried if she seems to be down for a period. Inflatable bags or net slings are suitable and can tell you a lot about her ability to use her legs properly but, if they don't work rapidly, they can cause other problems. Her back should be checked and, if she makes no effort to move off she should be gently and comfortably replaced in the sternal recumbency position. Repeated lifting can be traumatic in itself but may be necessary, in longer-term cases, to try to prevent sores, cramps etc. [*Chiropractic*](#) treatment of her back can be very valuable, if back problems are suspected. [*Acupuncture*](#) has proven its worth in restoring nerve function and reducing back pain in such cases. We use it frequently. [*Homeopathy*](#) can be enormously beneficial. Homeopathic treatment with *Hypericum* if there is nerve damage, *Arnica* if injury, *Rhus tox.* if muscular damage and *Ruta grav.* if there has been ligamentar strain all prove invaluable in aiding recovery. If there is simply a lack of 'lift' in the hind legs, with all else functioning correctly, then I have found homeopathic *Conium* to be very helpful. These homeopathic medicines work in a gentle and effective way, to stimulate healing of tissues and, surprisingly to the uninitiated, help the state of mind of the cow, which is so important to aid recovery and to maximise welfare. They are a **stimulus to healing**, not painkillers and can have no ill-effects on milk or meat from the animal, enabling sale of milk for human consumption.

What of prevention? Since the subject is so complex, with so many different possible 'causes' for downer cows, it is not easy to describe, succinctly, any prevention methods. However, in general, milk fever should be prevented as far as possible by proper [*nutrition*](#) in the dry period. Accidents on concrete should be minimised by preventing access to especially slippery surfaces, taking care in mixing groups, not rushing cows when driving on concrete, allowing sufficient time for a cow to gather herself and get up without harassment if she does fall on concrete (and sprinkling fine sand around her) and by not trying to force, kick or beat a cow into efforts she is not able to make, if she should fall on concrete. All that would do is tire her and possibly hurt her further, making eventual recovery less likely.

The Downer Cow - AVMC

Clearly, concrete is one of the worst enemies, although it is a necessity on the dairy farm. Efforts should be made to ensure that cows likely to be affected by calving, milk fever etc. are not on concrete at the time of risk. A cow that is bulling is at risk from mounting. Severely lame cows should be moved with caution. Concrete in loafing and housing areas should be well-maintained (since even normal 'bulling' activity can result in an accident).

It is clear that we make a living from our cows. We should, in turn, ensure that we maximise their welfare and minimise risk of injury.

Christopher Day - March 1997

To return to the web site of the AVMC, click the 'BACK' button of your browser or click www.alternativevet.org

This site is subject to frequent ongoing development and expansion - please revisit to view new material

