

North Star Veterinary Services Newsletter

July 2020

Down Cow Series - Part 1: Care

One of the most important animal health and welfare problems on dairies today is a down cow. Down cows are considered emergencies and care should be given immediately. Because this topic is so important, we will be doing a series to outline the care of a down cow and the three main reasons a cow could be down. This first part will focus on the methods of moving a down cow, the care of a cow while down, and knowing when to euthanize.

Methods of moving a down cow

1. Skid steer/tractor bucket - put the bucket on the ground and slowly move the bucket close to her. Be careful to not pinch or cut the skin. Taking a halter, tie her head to her leg and roll her by hand into the bucket as the bucket is lifted and tipped back. Tuck the legs into the bucket. Slowly move her to an appropriate area.
2. Sled/ Stone Boat - Roll the cow onto the sled and tuck her legs onto it. Tie her head to her leg with a halter and then pull the sled to the appropriate area.
3. If an animal needs to be moved a short distance in order to get them on a sled or bucket then broad straps looped around the body can be used to move them. See image below



4. INAPPROPRIATE METHODS
 - a. Dragging across the ground by legs or head
 - b. Moving by attaching hip lifts

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Management Steps

1. Observe the environment the cow is down in and immediately move the cow if in a position or area that may cause further injury to the cow or will prevent the cow from getting up.
2. Assess why the animal is down and treat accordingly. If you are unsure about the cause of the cow being down, please contact us to help with treatment decisions – Our next newsletters will go into more detail with this step
3. If after getting the cow into a normal sitting position and if treatment does not cause the cow to get up immediately, she should be provided the following:
 - a. Feed - normal ration with added dry hay
 - b. Water - depending on lactation status, size, and time of year, cows require between 20 and 40 gallons of water a day. This water needs to be provided in a container that cannot be tipped over but is low enough that the cow can stick her nose in. Five gallon buckets are NOT acceptable. Containers such as old 55 gallon drums cut down, low walled plastic storage containers, plastic kiddie pools, etc. are good alternatives.
 - c. Deep bedding that is clean and dry in an area with good footing - this prevents further injury that may delay recovery.
 - d. If the animal is outside, shelter should be provided to protect the animal from direct sunlight and inclement weather.
4. To prevent nerve damage, down cows should be rolled 3-4x per day so that the down leg is switched i.e. if she is laying on her right side, then she should be rolled to be on her left side.
5. Using hip lifts
 - a. Only lift the cow high enough so that her back legs are extended but still touching the ground
 - b. Use 2 times per day for 10-20 minutes if the cow can support her at least 3/4 of her weight.
 - i. If she is unable to support at least 3/4 of her weight, immediately put her down and do not attempt to keep her hanging with the lifts
 - c. Never leave a cow unattended while using hip lifts
6. If she does not want to lay upright, straw or hay bales can be used to keep her propped upright.

Euthanasia Decision

The decision to euthanize a down cow depends on many factors and each situation needs to be assessed on a case by case basis. We recommend that each cow be evaluated daily for any ability to stand. If no improvement is made within 2-4 days even with treatment, euthanasia should be performed.

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