

To dry treat or to not dry treat?

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Total dry cow therapy, the infusion of all quarters of all cows with antibiotics following the last milking of the lactation, is one of the proven fundamental components of good mastitis control in dairy herds. At current prices for commonly used dry cow preparations, the cost of the antibiotics to dry treat a cow is \$8 to 10 per cow. In addition to the antibiotics, many producers also infuse all quarters with a teat sealant preparation which costs an additional \$8 per cow. So cost to “dry treat” a cow will range from \$8 to 18 per cow, or a producer milking 100 cows will spend from \$800 to 1,800 per year to dry treat cows. During challenging economic times producers may be tempted to reduce costs by eliminating or reducing the use of dry cow therapy.

Total dry cow therapy is an effective way to treat all infected quarters in the herd at least one time during each lactation, and many of these treated infections will be eliminated. Total dry cow therapy will also prevent many new intramammary infections which occur frequently during the first week or two of the dry period.

Some who want to save money will adopt selective dry cow therapy and treat only the cow or quarters that need treatment. This will require some method for selection of cows that should be treated. There will be a cost associated with this selection method, and no method will be 100% accurate in detecting infected quarters. In addition, there is no way to predict which quarters will become newly infected during the dry period and would require dry cow therapy to prevent those infections.

Producers that use teat sealants may be tempted to discard the use of either the antibiotics or the teat sealant. Use of the teat sealants in the absence of the antibiotic therapy is high risk and is not recommended. Should economic conditions dictate that only antibiotics or teat sealants can be used, dry cow antibiotics are likely to have greater positive impact on mastitis control in the dairy herd.

Bottom Line: Attempts to save money by eliminating total dry cow therapy with antibiotics may save a few dollars in the short run but will very likely cost producers in the future due to increased bulk milk somatic cell counts and increased incidence of clinical cases of mastitis.

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