

UBC DAIRY CENTRE

Research Report #2

Tail Docking Dairy Cattle

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To dock or not to dock, that is the question.

Increasingly, dairy farmers are choosing to tail dock their cattle. Tail docking is most commonly carried out at one of two ages: 1) just after weaning in calves, or 2) a few weeks before first calving. There are two main methods of docking. When docking adults, it is most common to place a tight rubber ring on the tail approximately 12 cm below the vulva. After 1-3 weeks, the lower portion of the tail is removed. The rubber ring method is also used with calves; however, some farmers choose to tail dock their calves using a docking iron.

The practice of tail docking dairy cattle first became common in New Zealand. The practice was thought to reduce transmission to workers of diseases carried by cows, such as Leptospirosis. However, research indicates that other measures, like improved worker hygiene are more effective in controlling disease transmission. A second reason for docking was that it made milking more comfortable for workers because the shortened tail was less likely to hit people. This is thought to be particularly true in parlours where milking occurs between the hind legs.



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In North America, where tail docking is now gaining a foothold, farmers cite other reasons for docking including cow cleanliness and udder health. Docking is thought to improve cow cleanliness because the tail can transfer feces onto the cow. Cleaner cows should be exposed to fewer pathogens and therefore experience improved udder health.

We recently tested if docking helps improve cow cleanliness and udder health by performing an experiment on a commercial free-stall dairy farm in British Columbia. The farmer had decided to dock his 500 milking-cow herd, but generously agreed to leave approximately half of the herd intact for an 8-week period to help us with this experiment. During this time we compared cow cleanliness, udder cleanliness, and udder health.

We found no difference between cows with intact tails and those that had been docked in terms of any of our cleanliness measures, milk somatic cell counts or cases of mastitis as diagnosed by the herd veterinarian. This research will be published in the January issue of the *Journal of Dairy Science*. A New Zealand study examining animals on pasture also found no difference in cleanliness between cows with tails and those that had been docked. These results suggest that with the possible exception of improved worker comfort, producers (and their cows) have little to gain from tail docking.

There may also be disadvantages associated with docking, including pain associated with the procedure and impaired fly control. Perhaps surprisingly, existing evidence suggests that the pain due to docking is relatively mild. Animals show little physiological or behavioral responses to the procedure. There is, however, good evidence that docking impairs the cow's ability to control flies. In three separate studies researchers have found more flies on docked animals, and docked cows show more fly removal behaviors, such as tail flicking and leg stamping.

One factor that may affect cow cleanliness is the cleanliness of the free stall, and this in turn is affected by free-stall design. We are currently working on several experiments examining the effects of stall design on cow comfort and other issues such as stall cleanliness. In one series of experiments we are examining the effects of stall

dimensions such as stall width and neck-rail height. In other work we have looked at bedding types and surfaces. We are also doing more basic work on the space requirements of cows as they lie down and stand up, and how this is affected by stall design. This work will lead to recommendations on practical stall designs that improve cow comfort.

Stay tuned to this newsletter for more information about this research and other studies being performed at The University of British Columbia's Dairy Education and Research Centre.



Student Cassandra Tucker measures udder cleanliness in the milking parlour.