

Udder Prep Routines – a missed opportunity in the quest for milk quality?

By Tom Herremans, MMPA Mastitis Management Supervisor

Most dairy producers agree that cows respond favorably to consistently performed udder prep routines. Cows are most comfortable and content when absolutely nothing in their daily routine changes. We all know that comfortable and content cows eat more, produce more milk and are easier to handle. Cows do not respond well to rough handling, strangers or variation to their daily routine.

Udder Prep — the most intimate and frequent interaction

The udder prep routine is not only the key to milk quality and mammary health, but it is the most intimate daily physical interaction that people who milk cows have with those cows. Any dairy producer understands that cows do not like change or surprises. Even more important, cows do not respond well to change or differences in their routines and especially the udder prep routines.

Eliminate All Variation in Udder Prep

Unfortunately, variation in udder prep (especially the touch times and lag times) is the norm on many dairy farms. When as few as two people do the milking, even if they are family members, it is not unusual to see significant variations in the udder prep. How much more opportunity for variation is there on the farm where as many as 15 or 20 different people are used to milk the cows.

Variation — huge obstacle to fast milk out

Even farms that have good written protocols for their udder prep routine often experience significant variation. This often happens if the routine is not understood or not enforced.

When we closely examine the ever important touch time and the lag time, we often see significant variation. For the purpose of this article, touch time is defined as the time spent cleaning the teats which also stimulates the cows to produce oxytocin and lag time is the time from the start of stimulation (cleaning) until the milking unit is attached. Variations in touch time and lag time result in variations in the rate of milkout. This variation in the rate of milkout can be traced directly back to how much deviation there was from the ideal touch time and lag time targets.

Equipment is Consistent — udder prep routines are not

Today's high producing cows deserve and need to experience the shortest unit on times and the highest milk flow rates possible. Today's milking equipment is seldom the limiting factor in achieving the shortest unit on times and highest milk flow rates, but the people milking can be.

The udder prep routine is usually the greatest variation that the cow experiences at milking time. Ironically, the udder prep routine is where the greatest variation often occurs particularly those specific tasks that have the greatest influence on milk flow and milk quality.

Every farm has a routine — good, bad or inconsistent

Every farm has a milking routine, even if it is not written down. The actual udder prep within that routine may be totally different depending on which person is performing the routine. This human influence on milking performance is often overlooked but is not expensive to correct. If your goal is an excellent udder prep routine, I would offer the following approach to determine if your udder prep routine will help you in your pursuit of excellence in milk quality.

Evaluate your udder prep routine — Is it consistent and correct?

Decide if your udder prep routine is as good as it can be for the cow and milk quality or if it is just comfortable for you or your employee.

Determine if every person that milks cows on your farm uses the same timing and technique in the execution of your udder prep routine. Pay special attention to the time and technique used during the touch time (cleaning and stimulating) and the amount of lag time (the time that passes from the start of cleaning and stimulation until the unit is attached).

If you are not comfortable doing an evaluation of your own udder prep routine or that of a family member or employee, MMPA's Member Representatives are trained in evaluating udder prep routines and will be happy to assist you in that effort.

Use employees who are willing to milk cows the way you want them milked

If you pay someone to milk cows for you, they should be willing to do it your way. The udder prep routine should be chiseled in stone and any attempts to alter the routine should result in dismissal from that responsibility. The sacred nature of the udder prep routine should be made clear and the potential employee must agree to comply before being hired.

Training — mandatory for veterans and new employees alike

Most employees want to do a good job and to please their employer. Employees are empowered and more likely to be successful if they understand how important their job is and exactly how it is expected to be done. The probability of procedure deviation is even less when the employees understand why the timing and technique are so important. These simple concepts of understanding how and why, when incorporated into a training program are beneficial to new and veteran employees alike. The security that employees experience when they know they are doing what the employer wants pays dividends in the quality of the job performance.

If you are not comfortable doing the training of employees or family members yourself, use an outside instructor who is trained in proper technique and who can relate to people well. MMPA's Member Representatives are all trained in excellent udder prep technique and are willing to provide whatever assistance you may need in that area. MMPA also offers Milker Training Schools at various locations around the state during February and March. These schools are an in-depth look at excellent udder prep routines and include a hands-on session as part of the training. If you are interested in attending, see page 15 of this *Messenger* for a list of the schools offered and a registration form.

Routines drift quickly unless reinforced — Evaluate and train some more!

Training for everyone in a farm's udder prep routine is a necessary starting point on the road to consistency, but the initial training is only the beginning. Udder prep routines that are carried out consistently by every farm employee will never

continue unless the performance is evaluated and the training is reinforced.

Just the fact that the farm owner or manager is taking the time to observe and evaluate sends a strong message that the routine is important. Employees that are doing a good job want the employer to know. Evaluation time gives them an opportunity to showcase their skills, ask questions, exchange ideas and develop confidence in the job performance.

Happy cows live in Michigan too

Cows that are milked with an excellent udder prep routine every milking can't help but be happy. If happy cows produce the best quality milk, MMPA members must be milking a lot of happy cows. The average SCC for MMPA members in November 2009 was 194,000 and December 2009 was 190,000. Those monthly averages are the lowest ever in MMPA's history. Congratulations to all the MMPA members who have achieved great results in milk quality.



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