Winter health strategies for calf-to-beef animals

Parasite control is crucial for maintaining healthy dairy-beef herds. As housing approaches, tackling worms, fluke and respiratory disease is key to keeping stock thriving and on track for finishing

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Parasites reduce growth rates, lower feed efficiency, suppress immunity and, in severe cases, cause disease and death.

For dairy-beef systems aiming to maximise weight gain from grass and keep animals on target for finishing, the presence of stomach worms, lungworm and liver fluke can completely derail these plans.

In the first grazing season, calves are particularly at risk. They haven't been exposed to parasitic infections and haven't yet built up immunity. As such, pre-housing is a critical time to assess and address parasite burdens, to ensure animals go into the shed healthy and thriving.

Worms a year-round concern

Worms, particularly stomach worms and gut worms, are typically the biggest concern during the main grazing season. However, winter control is equally important.

As stock head into housing, worm larvae that have not been eliminated can remain dormant in the animal over winter.

These inhibited larvae can resume development in late winter or early spring, leading to a condition known as Type II Ostertagiosis, a severe parasitic disease that can cause sudden weight loss, scouring and even death.

Regular dung sampling is a simple but effective tool for parasite monitoring. Samples should be taken towards the end of the grazing season and assessed for egg counts. If positive, animals should be treated accordingly.

A follow-up sample three to four weeks post-treatment is good practice to confirm the efficacy of the chosen product. This ensures that the animals are genuinely clear of infection and helps avoid building resistance on your farm.

Choosing the right wormer

When selecting a worming product in late autumn or early winter, it's vital to use one that is effective against all life stages of stomach worms, including inhibited larvae.

- **Levamisole (Yellow drenches):** effective against adult worms only. Not effective against inhibited larvae. No residual activity.
- **Benzimidazoles (White drenches):** some are effective against inhibited larvae, but not all. Always check the label.
- **Macrocyclic Lactones (Clear drenches such as ivermectins, doramectin, moxidectin):** these

• are effective against both adult and inhibited larvae and provide some persistent protection.

For winter treatment, macrocyclic lactones or appropriate benzimidazoles are generally recommended to cover all life stages.

Lungworm

There has been a noticeable increase in lungworm across some DairyBeef 500 farms in 2025, particularly in young dairy-beef stock. Lungworm infection can result in coughing, difficulty breathing, poor weight gain and, in severe cases, death due to secondary pneumonia. Signs to watch for include persistent husky cough, especially after moving animals, laboured breathing and reduced thrive or appetite

Lungworm (*inset*) can escalate quickly, so a pre-housing treatment is strongly recommended, even if animals appear healthy. Clinical signs often lag behind infection, so visible symptoms mean the burden is already high.

Treatment options

- **Levamisole:** gentler kill, best option where heavy burdens present,
- **White drenches:** fast-acting, knock out existing worms, but offer no residual protection.
- **Macrocyclic Lactones:** Treat existing infections and provide several weeks of protection post-treatment.

Lungworm control is most effective when combined with good grazing management and strategic dosing. Regular monitoring, especially in high-risk years, remains key.

Liver fluke

Unlike worms, liver fluke becomes more problematic in the latter part of the grazing season and during housing. Infected animals often show subtle signs at first such as poor thrive, reduced appetite and poor weight gain. The effects on performance can be substantial.

Liver fluke has a complex life cycle involving mud snails as intermediate hosts. Wet pastures, poorly drained fields, and mild winters favour the survival of both snails and fluke, making certain farms high risk.

Understanding fluke development stages

- 0-5 weeks post-infection: Early immature fluke.
- 6-10 weeks: immature fluke.
- 11+ weeks: adult fluke.

The challenge in winter fluke control is selecting the correct product for the right fluke stage. Not all flukicides are equal; some only kill adult fluke, while others cover earlier stages.

Choosing the right flukicide

Triclabendazole is the only product that treats all three stages, making it ideal for early post housing treatment. However, resistance has been reported in parts of the country, so use it strategically and avoid over reliance.

If fluke burdens are moderate or low, consider treating with a product effective against immature and adult fluke six weeks post-housing. If using a product that only treats adult fluke, stock must be housed at least 11-12 weeks before treatment to ensure fluke have matured.

Faecal sampling can be used to detect liver fluke eggs, but only adult fluke shed eggs, so results may underestimate the true burden. In this case, the Beef HealthCheck data available through ICBF can offer valuable insights from slaughtered animals, helping identify if fluke has been an issue historically on your farm.

Rumen fluke

Rumen fluke is generally not as severe an issue in dairy beef systems. In faecal tests the majority of animals may show low levels of rumen fluke present, but treatment is not required unless clinical signs such as scouring and weight loss are evident. Oxyclozanide products are the only drug effective treatment of rumen fluke therefore correct use is essential to prevent resistance.

Vaccination protocols for respiratory disease

Winter housing increases the risk of respiratory disease due to closer animal contact, reduced ventilation and environmental stressors. Pneumonia remains a major health concern and a cause of economic loss on dairy calf-to-beef farms.

Vaccination options

Vaccines targeting the most common respiratory pathogens are available in intra-nasal and injectable forms:

- Intra-nasal vaccines protect against viral infections caused by Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV) and Parainfluenza Type 3 (Pi3). These can be administered shortly before housing, with protection developing in five days and lasting up to three months.
- Injectable vaccines cover RSV, Pi3, and the bacterial pneumonia pathogen Mannheimia haemolytica. The recommended programme involves two shots, four weeks apart, with the initial shot given at least six weeks before housing and a booster at least two weeks pre-housing. If calves were vaccinated the previous spring, a single booster two weeks before housing may suffice.
- Infectious Bovine Rhinotracheitis (IBR) is another viral threat causing upper respiratory tract inflammation and performance loss. Both intranasal and injectable vaccines are available and can be administered alongside pneumonia vaccines.

Good husbandry is essential

While vaccination forms a critical part of disease prevention, it cannot replace good husbandry practices. Factors such as, adequate ventilation to reduce airborne pathogens, avoiding overcrowding to reduce stress and transmission, effective parasite control to maintain immune competence must be prioritised to support vaccination efficacy and animal health.

Table 1: Active ingredients and stages treated

Active ingredient	Liver fluke stages		
	Early Immature	Immature	Mature
Triclabendazole	✓	✓	✓
Closantel		✓	✓
Clorsulon			✓
Oxyclozanide			✓
Nitroxynil		✓	✓
Rafoxanide		✓	✓
Albendazole			✓

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