

# A proactive approach to managing Johne's disease is a positive step

Johne's disease affects most dairy herds across the UK and can negatively impact both the cows' physical health and economic productivity. But proactive management can really turn things around, as one Cheshire farm discovered. British Dairying reports.

Cows testing positive for Johne's are twice as likely to produce milk yields 25% lower than the herd's adjusted average, increasing disease costs to more than 1-2ppl.

And one farm which dealt with test-positive cows for several years is Curtis Hulme Farm, near Middlewich, Cheshire. Run by Caroline Williams, the herd of 450 three-way cross cows calve year-round and yield approximately 8,600 litres/cow, at 4.2% butterfat and 3.4% protein. To try and tackle the disease, she started by testing a cohort of 30 cows, gradually expanding to testing the entire herd more frequently.



The farm team don't breed replacements from high-risk animals

breeding positive cows and their female offspring to beef, reducing the number of replacements from high-risk animals."

The team at Curtis Hulme see the impact of clinical cases and understand the importance of putting measures into place. "The positive results are evident," she notes. "Cows with conditions like lameness or mastitis also often test positive for Johne's. Cleanliness and timely intervention in the calving pen have played crucial roles in reducing Johne's spread and had the added benefit of enhancing calf health, reducing infectious diseases and improving the wellbeing of both the animals and the farm team."

"Seeing poorly cows and the effect it has on the herd really gets you down," she says. "Starting the testing has been a positive step for us." The decision to take action came naturally, driven by encouragement from their vet and requirements from their milk contract. "The more we did, the more we found and gained from it."

To manage high-risk cows and contain infection, those with a positive reading are tagged with a bright orange J tag – a visual marker which helps to identify and manage cows separately. "We do our best to ensure these cows calve in a designated dry-cow pen, keeping them away from the main calving area," explains Caroline.

### Colour-coded list

Efficient management extends beyond the barn. The farm uses a colour-coded list to identify cows based on their health status, allowing easier decision-making on culling and breeding.

The initial phase was daunting, with a significant portion of the herd identified as high-risk. "Managing the risk and setting realistic expectations were crucial," says Caroline. "It felt overwhelming at times, but it was necessary for the future health of the herd. One of the most successful strategies has been

**"Many farms have the disease but may not be aware of its presence."**

Sarah Tomlinson, a practising farm vet for over 20 years and AHDB's lead veterinary science expert, explains that Johne's is a bacterial disease. "It's an interesting one because the bacteria are resistant to any sort of treatments. We can't treat Johne's, so that's the challenge - and it's unusual because the normal route of infection

### Farm facts

Curtis Hulme Farm comprises 219ha, including 81ha rented with the rest contract farmed, growing maize, wheat, barley, and grass with clover leys.

The Williams family joined the AHDB's Strategic Dairy Farm programme last year. This three-year programme is driven by farmers, for farmers, using open meetings on farms across the UK to help producers share knowledge and learn from one another.



Johne's takes two to five years to develop, and is an untreatable disease

is when the calf ingests infected faeces from an infected cow."

The incubation period for Johne's typically lasts two to five years before it develops in an adult cow. The first signs in an adult cow often include a reduction in milk production, says Sarah. The cow may begin to appear less healthy and not perform as well as expected.

Over time, she may also suffer from other diseases, like mastitis and increased somatic cell counts. If the condition is left untreated, the animal may eventually reach a state of emaciation and, ultimately, death.

### Removing animals

"What we find, though, in most modern, well-run dairy herds, is that farmers quite often remove those animals from the herd before the symptoms fully develop; so many farms have the disease but may not be aware of its presence."

When looking to identify and tackle Johne's disease, Sarah advises

milk recording to gather data on each cow within the herd. "If you identify infected animals early, you can make sure they don't go into those communal areas, like the maternity and calving yard, and contaminate your replacement calves. So, you're trying to break the cycle."

The potential benefits of addressing Johne's disease are substantial. The reasons for wanting to control the disease will vary between farms. For some, it may be about improving the overall health and welfare of the herd, while for others, it could be environmental benefits, like reducing the farm's carbon footprint, says Sarah. Why farmers are motivated is not a problem, as the ultimate goal remains the same.

"The journey may be a long one, but the rewards of healthier herds and a more manageable farm operation are well worth the effort."

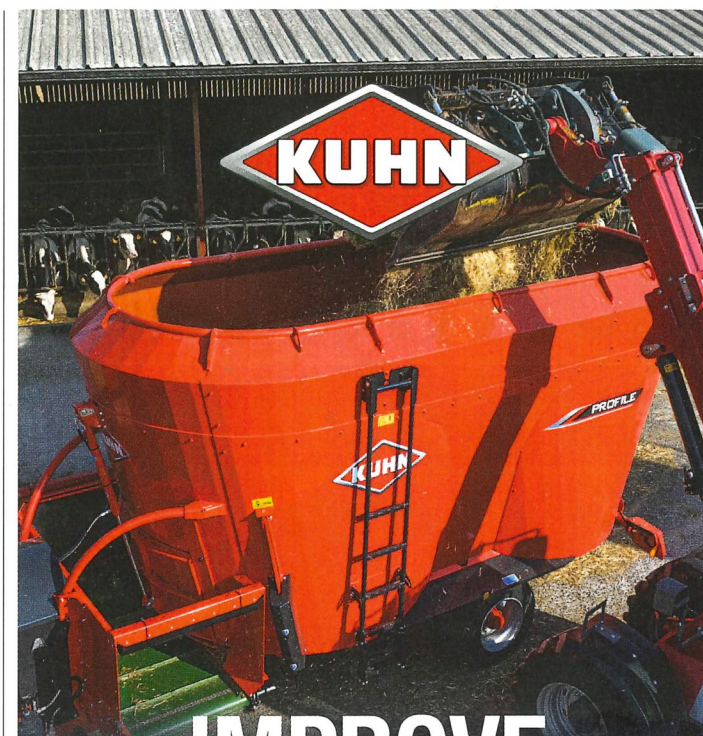
Find out more at: [ahdb.org.uk/farm-excellence/dairy](http://ahdb.org.uk/farm-excellence/dairy).

### Johne's Action Group

The Action Group on Johne's has introduced the National Johne's Management Plan, aimed at managing and reducing the incidence of Johne's disease on dairy farms across GB. The plan involves implementing one of six control strategies, with progress on each farm monitored by BCVA-accredited Johne's veterinary advisers.



Calf and cow hygiene are essential to avoid cross-infection



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