

**Managing Down Cows**  
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**WVMA Guiding Principle**

The WVMA recognizes disabled cattle prognosis and treatment plan development as a vital aspect of the veterinarian-client-patient relationship (VCPR) on every dairy farm. Disabled cattle should be examined by a veterinarian in a timely manner to determine a prognosis and treatment plan for the individual animal. Disabled cattle need to be handled humanely in all situations. When moving down cows they should be placed on a suitable surface that prevents direct and indirect injury to the animal while being moved.

Down cows are a reality of dairy production: **Have a plan!**

**Protocol and SOP Considerations (Who, When, What and How)**

- Be prepared both mentally and logistically
  - Keep a positive attitude
  - Keep negative emotions in check
  - Look forward, fix the problem at hand, don't get into blame game
  -

**Establish and maintain a positive cow care ethos**

- Cow care culture of dairy starts at the top of management and trickles down
- Positive attitudes
- Reasonable, logical and practical priorities
- Clear expectations
- Defined tolerances
- Ready state of preparedness
- Identify and leverage personnel passions and interests
  - Identify and involve cow people
  - Enable the cow people

**The Who**

- Who is responsible; what's the chain of command?
- Every farm has unique chain of responsibility
- Establish who is responsible for decisions regarding down cows
- Utilize your veterinarian to establish on-farm protocols and SOPs, and assist in a timely manner with individual cases as needed
- Train and re-train

**The When**

- When do you implement the plan? **Down cows need urgent attention.**

*2004 Dairy Today, Dr. Vic Cox, University of Minnesota:*

- "My research shows that any time a cow is lying on concrete for more than six hours, pressure damage will occur to the hind leg that she's lying on."

- **“So producers have to treat the downer cow as an emergency, not something they get to after the other chores are done, you have to treat it aggressively, get them moved off of hard concrete and onto clean straw or preferably sand.”**

*Jeff Henschel, Waupaca County dairyman:*

- “Concrete and steel are a cow’s two worst enemies”

## **The What**

- Situation assessment
  - Where is the cow down
    - In maternity pen
    - In a free-stall
    - In the holding area
    - In an alley
    - In a stanchion and/or gutter
    - On pasture
  - What is the history
    - Age
    - Just fresh
    - Lameness
    - Recent heat
- Is the cow cast?
  - Lateral recumbent cow
  - An uneven surface that is slightly higher at the point of the downside shoulder
  - Cow is “over-center”- her core muscles cannot pull her over the hump to her sternum
  - Cows can thrash and beat their head on the ground/floor
  - Cows if left in this position for extended time they will bloat
  - Tuck down rear leg forward and roll the cow onto her sternum
- Initial Treatment & Tincture of Time
  - If milk fever, give appropriate treatment
  - Examine for other disease conditions, with special attention to mastitis, administer appropriate treatment per farm protocol
  - Pain medication if necessary
  - Position cow to succeed
  - Give cow time to rest, build strength and gain confidence

## **The How**

### **Movement/Transporting the Cow**

- Sometimes the cow has to be moved to a better location to get up
- The two F’s of down cows
  - Freedom
    - Cows need adequate lunge room in front of them to “rock” up and move forward
    - Give them the assurance that they are free, no obstructions in front of the cow
    - A cow’s perceived freedom may require taking the halter off, so there no sense of external control by the cow
  - Footing

- Rear legs have to be able to dig in
  - Imagine the different way we arise from a picnic blanket in the summer to an ice rink in the winter
  - Add lime or sand to concrete surfaces
  - Put snow fence under the cow for rear leg footing
- From the WVMA Guiding Principle: **“Disabled cattle need to be handled humanely in all situations. When moving down cows they should be placed on a suitable surface that prevents direct and indirect injury to the animal while being moved.”**
  - **Do not pull cows by neck or legs directly. Damage to the cow’s skin, her largest immune organ, will only add insult to injury.**
    - Suitable surfaces for moving cows
      - Rubber mats
      - Wide material handling belting
      - Plywood or OSB board
      - Stone boats
      - Skid steer or tractor loader buckets

### **Bundling Cow for Movement**

- Bundle cow to roll her unto suitable surface, see photo:



- Roll cow backward onto surface, or slide surface under cow while she is rolled back.
- Then move the supporting surface.
- Place the cow on clean, well bedded pack, sand or dry earth.

### **Establish a prognosis and treatment plan**

- Cows needs to be off concrete in less than 6 hours
- If cow is not standing in 12 hours after being moved to suitable surface, she needs to be reevaluated for further treatment
  - Have veterinarian determine extent of injury if possible and if recovery is likely
  - Retreatment for underlying condition or new disease condition and the judicious use of pain killers when appropriate
- Hip lifters have limited use, many times creating more damage. Overuse is common.
- Consider floating the cow if those services are available
- If it is determined that the cow will not recover from the disease process or injury, the cow should be humanely euthanized.

### **Records**

- Track/Log individual down cow cases
  - Look for trends
  - Review treatment records
  - Record underlying causes
- Management adjustment/response opportunity
  - Teachable moments
  - Train and retraining
  - Identify how to prevent in future (facility design, nutrition)