

Definition of a downer cow:

A cow which has been sitting in sternal recumbency (i.e., sitting up, not flat out) >12 hours, irrespective of whether the original cause is known or not, with no evidence of systemic illness.

Did you know?

- **A cow is unable stand on her front legs if she can't stand on her back legs** - If you observe the way a cow rises, it's always back legs first.
- **Hypothermia (low core temperature) can have a significant impact.** A down cow eats less, moves less and starts to struggle to maintain her core temperature, especially when it's wet and cold outside. When core temperature drops significantly, internal organs start shutting down. **PREVENT THIS WITH A COW COVER!** Make sure a cow cover fits properly and will not restrain a cow when she is trying to rise. Ideally it should also be waterproof. Covers with both these features can be purchased at your clinic.
- **Secondary damage following recumbency is very common:** 85% of cows have secondary damage with 63% having more than one type of secondary damage.
- **When you've called a vet out:** have tractor and hip clamps ready (and chest strap!!)
- **Secondary damage can be the cause for continued recumbency (being down):** Research has shown cows that have been down for as little as 6 hours can experience secondary damage resulting in continued recumbency even though the initial cause has been resolved. This is due to both nerve and muscle damage from ongoing pressure on the affected areas. Padding under these areas is crucial!
- **Non-responsive milk fever patient:** Non-responsive milk fever patients showing no response to adequate milk fever treatment may suffer from "compartment syndrome" (like an extreme case of your leg 'going to sleep'). Provide soft bedding to reduce pressure and create movement by rolling the cow onto her other side and moving her legs around when strapped in under tractor etc.
- **Cows suffering from calving paralysis will frequently have one leg more affected than the other.** The stronger leg will always push the cow onto her weaker leg whenever she tries to rise which aggravates existing damage. Trauma from an animal trying to rise can cause hemorrhage within the muscles which increases pressure even further.

Important points: Hip clamps should not be used to move cows. If you need to move a cow, use a transport tray, tandem trailer or front-end loader bucket. Regardless of the method of transport, be sure to restrain the cow to prevent any additional harm, pain or distress.

The Animal Welfare Code for dairy cattle specifies the following minimum level of care for recumbent cows →

- ✓ cows must not be transported so that all her weight is carried by the hip clamps and vehicle alone (chest strap necessary!)
- ✓ if hip clamps are used they must be removed if the cow cannot promptly support her weight
- ✓ cows suspended in a sling must be able to breathe freely, not suffer unnecessary discomfort and be lowered from the sling if they are unable to support their own weight after one hour.

Recommended best practice

(ref Animal Welfare Code for Dairy Cattle)

1. Any cow that is unable to stand should receive veterinary attention within 48 hours of becoming recumbent or be destroyed humanely.



2. Recumbent cows must be inspected frequently, kept in an upright position (sitting up ('sternal') with legs tucked under the body) and shifted from side to side as often as possible.



3. Cows that are unable to stand should be kept on soft ground (straw bedding).



Gordonton
P: 07 824 2103
Maramarua
P: 09 232 5891

Matamata
P: 07 888 8068
Morrinsville
P: 07 889 5159

Ngaruawahia
P: 07 824 8630
Ngatea
P: 07 867 7256

Paeroa
P: 07 862 8815
Raglan
P: 07 825 8390

Te Aroha
P: 07 884 8014
Te Kauwhata
P: 07 826 3581

Thames
P: 07 868 7005
anexa.co.nz
0800 284 3838

Downer Cows Vet Tips Continued...



4. Where hip clamps are used, the following guidelines should be followed:

- ✓ prior to their application, a veterinary examination should be made to rule out conditions that will not respond and that will only increase pain and distress for the cow
- ✓ the hip clamps should be padded and applied firmly to prevent slipping and bruising
- ✓ the rear end of the animal should be lifted to a point where the feet are touching the ground so that weight bearing can take place
- ✓ if, after taking the weight of the animal on the hip clamps, the cow cannot be persuaded to take weight on the forelegs, the use of the clamps should be discontinued
- ✓ if an animal has failed to respond initially, she should be allowed to rest for a period before hip clamps are tried again.

5. Where cow slings are used:

- ✓ suspended animals should be inspected frequently
- ✓ no more than 2 suspending sequences in a day should be attempted.

For your information, the overall on-farm nursing and management of cows suffering from downer cow syndrome was found more important than veterinary treatment in regards to the likely outcome by a group of practicing and academic veterinarians during a veterinary symposium in the UK. After all, no amount of drugs are going to get a cow on her feet when she's suffering from repeat pressure damage on nerves and musculature. Ultimately, this pressure will have to be lifted through nursing:

- deep and soft bedding with secure footing
- regular turning and lifting
- accessible feed and water.



To watch a short animation on how to lift cows visit:
www.dairynz.co.nz/animal/cow-health/down-cows/

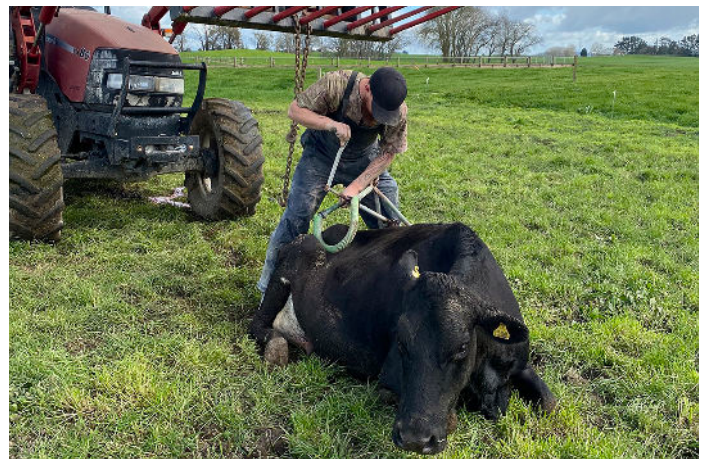
Statistics show that half of the downer cows rise within 4-7 days, but individual results vary widely depending on the level of nursing provided. The prognosis for cows that have been down for more than 10 days is poor.

This is what you need to nurse a downer cow:

1. A soft, clean and dry bed at least 30cm deep in a sheltered place (straw/hay)
2. Confinement → a cow will easily crawl away from her perfect bed if she isn't confined and crawling causes (more) nerve damage. Note that confinement doesn't mean isolation!
3. Enough space to stand but not walk
4. Plenty of fresh water and food
5. Frequently roll her onto her other side
6. Anti-inflammatories for max 3 days.

When moving your downer cow:

- ✓ Ideally in the bucket of a tractor, tie the head securely
- ✓ When using hip clamps → have a chest strap as well!! Cows were not designed to be transported hanging from their hips!



When lifting your cow:

Before you apply hip lifters to a down cow, thoroughly check for dislocations or broken bones; if in doubt, get a vet to check her. Remember these key point for effective and safe use of hip lifters.

1. A cow needs to be able to stand in a natural position and support her own weight. Cow 'lifters' should never become cow 'hangers'!
2. A chest strap should always be used with hip lifters that are being used to support a cow while she stands.
3. Hip clamps should be padded so protect her hip bones.
4. Downer cows tire easily, which will make lifting ineffective. Short periods of lifting, several times during the day are more beneficial than fewer, longer lifts.

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