



nantwich
farm vets LTD

MAY 2026

Bull Fertility - critical for a successful spring block calving

With spring block farms thinking about putting bulls in with the cows in the next couple of months it could be time to have your bulls tested. Whether you rely heavily on AI or simply use a sweeper bull at the end, having a bull that is fit, fertile and ready to work is essential to keep your calving pattern tight and profitable.



THE COST OF GETTING IT WRONG

A 3-year trial (SRUC, 2025) found that ~20% of bulls fail a breeding soundness exam, regardless of age or breed. Turning out an untested bull in a spring block system is a major risk—one that can quickly lead to a spread-out calving pattern, lighter calves, and significant financial loss.

A fertile bull should achieve ~94% pregnancy in 9 weeks, and even small drops in fertility costs £2–4 per cow per day depending on the system.

IS YOUR BULL SEASON READY?

Ahead of turnout, make sure you consider the following factors for your bulls:

Strong libido and fitness

Bulls need to be active and mobile. Aim for a body condition score of 3–3.5—overfat or thin bulls will underperform.

Ability to serve cows effectively

Observing bulls working is important. Issues such as injury or abnormalities can prevent successful mating.

Good semen quality

The only reliable way to assess this is through a pre-breeding fertility test.

Clear of infectious disease

Bulls should be vaccinated and screened appropriately before mixing with the herd.

Quarantine

All incoming bulls should be quarantined for 3 weeks prior to serving

LAMENESS: A COMMON BUT COSTLY ISSUE

Lame bulls don't work! In a tight spring block, even a few days of reduced activity can mean missed heats and empty cows.

- Check feet and mobility well in advance
- Trim feet at least 6–8 weeks before breeding
- Act quickly on any signs of lameness

When buying bulls, pay close attention to foot and leg conformation to reduce future risk.

Shared or hired bulls carry additional risk, particularly for diseases like *Campylobacter*, which can severely disrupt fertility in a block system. Where possible, avoid sharing. If unavoidable, testing before use is strongly advised.

DON'T BE CAUGHT OUT THIS SPRING

Running multiple bulls can mask an infertile individual, however a dominant infertile bull can have large effects on fertility as he will be the one that serves the most cows. Every bull should be tested before the breeding season starts. With block calving, you only get one opportunity to get cows in calf—there's no time to recover lost ground.

If you've recently bought a bull, are unsure of performance, or are preparing for turnout, now is the time to act. A pre-breeding exam or full fertility test including semen assessment, can give confidence going into the season and help avoid costly surprises. Get in touch with the office or directly with myself or Joe to ensure you get your breeding season started with your bulls firing on all cylinders!



Trials and tribulations of spring grass

GRASS STAGGERS

As we enter the spring grazing period, we have started to see a rise in the cases of grass staggers (hypomagnesaemia). This may be a knock-on effect due to the lower rainfall last year, as reduced soil moisture reduces magnesium uptake and accumulation in the grass. When this is followed by rainfall, the rapid re-wetting of soil triggers a sudden increase in available soil nitrogen and potassium. Absorbed potassium hinders the plants' ability to take up magnesium, creating a 'high potassium/low magnesium' condition in the grass. As the grass grows quickly, the already low magnesium concentration within the grass becomes further diluted, reducing the overall magnesium available to the cattle. Any prolonged dry period also weakens the grass' root system and reduces its ability to absorb nutrients efficiently the following season.

Cattle can't easily mobilise magnesium from their body reserves, so they are dependent on consistent daily intakes. As they are turned out to lush, fast-growing grass (especially if fertilised with nitrogen or potassium), gut transit time decreases and so absorption from the rumen is impaired.

Signs

Adult, lactating cows are most commonly affected, as milk production has a high demand on magnesium. Magnesium is essential for proper nerve and muscle function, and low blood magnesium can have a very acute effect. Cows may show restlessness, nervousness or over-excitability, muscle twitching, staggering, uncoordinated movements or a stiff gait, progressing to collapse, convulsions and death if not treated promptly.

Treatment

Grass staggers should be treated as an emergency, and consists of a bottle of magnesium administered under the skin, alongside a bottle of calcium, either intravenously or under the skin.

Prevention

When turning your cows out to grass, prevention strategies should be a routine part of herd management during high-risk periods. Magnesium can be supplemented in different routes – including bolusing, mineral licks or magnesium chloride flakes in water troughs. Additionally, avoid grazing high-risk pastures (lush, heavily fertilised fields) with cows that will be more susceptible, or slowly introducing them to it. Offering silage alongside grazing can help to stabilise rumen function and improve mineral absorption.



In summary, grass staggers is a serious but largely preventable condition. By understanding the risk factors and implementing a proactive supplementation plan, we can significantly reduce the number of cases seen and the number of losses.

FROTHY BLOAT

Another condition to be aware of during turn-out is frothy bloat, caused by highly digestible, lush spring grass and legumes (clover/alfalfa). It occurs when fermentation of these sorts of forage in the rumen produces a stable foam (lots of smaller gas bubbles) that can't be eructated (or burped) normally and remains trapped. As pressure builds, the rumen expands, compressing the lungs and major blood vessels, which can result in death within a short time if not treated promptly. Highest risk is when cattle are hungry as they're turned out, especially during cool, wet conditions.

Signs

Early signs to look out for include; bloating on the left side, discomfort, reduced grazing and restlessness. As the condition progresses, you may see laboured breathing, increased urination and eventually collapse.

Treatment

Because of the foam formation, frothy bloat often can't be relieved just by stomach tubing. Drenching with vegetable oil or other anti-foaming agent is required, and if the bloat is severe enough to compromise breathing, a rumenal trochar is called for.

Prevention

Prevention is far more effective than treatment. Avoid turning out cattle hungry, directly onto high-risk pastures. Offer silage beforehand or alongside to reduce rapid intake of lush grass. Strip grazing helps significantly, as you are slowly introducing the stock to the fresh grass. Maintaining a mixed pasture with adequate fibre content, rather than clover-dominant leys, also helps to reduce the risk. It can be almost entirely avoided with careful planning and management.

If you are seeing increased incidence of either of these conditions in your spring grazing herd, do let your vet know. Alongside effective treatment, we can help advise on management options to reduce the risk of them occurring in the first place.



An annual mention of heat stress (and other comments) from Craig...

Whilst the warm weather is enabling you all to get some field work done it is worth bearing in mind that though we enjoy the rise in temperature the milking cows of this world would much prefer it to remain cooler. Signs of heat stress can become apparent when the temperature humidity index rises over 68, which roughly equates to 22C! Each and every newsletter contribution I make seems to fall around the time that temperature increases, and I am ridiculed for mentioning this (*not least by the editor...*), so we'll move on, but please don't hesitate to get in touch with one of the vets if you have any questions or concerns relating to heat stress and how to keep your cows cool in the summer months.

Actually, no, I won't move on! This is a good opportunity to mention that with the warmer temperature comes an increased risk of the *Culicoides* midge and its multiplication in the UK. This biting insect is the vector for Bluetongue virus. At the time of writing both England and Wales are classified as restricted zones, and there have been 333 cases since July 2025. Because of this, and the unpredictability of weather forecasting to assess risk, vaccination is still recommended. Although not officially confirmed from field data, duration of activity for the vaccine is expected to be 12 months. Any cattle that had the two-dose primary course last year only require a single booster this year.

Join leading dairy farmers from across Europe at the

European Dairy Farmers Congress in Chester, UK this June!

23rd - 25th June 2026

"New Challenges.
New Opportunities."

- ✓ Hear from thought-provoking speakers
- ✓ Take part in interactive workshops
- ✓ Experience informative farm tours

Over three days, share ideas, connect with, and explore the future of dairy farming with enthusiasts from across Europe.

REGISTER
NOW!



For more information, visit:
www.dairyfarmer.net

Kingshay
Providing Evidence-Based Livestock Solutions

Team News

This month Amy starts her maternity leave with the upcoming arrival of child number two. We wish her and the family all the best for the birth and exciting changes that will bring.

Please note below the changes to our Office and Dispensary opening times for being able to pick up any medicines. Our out of hours cover will also start from 5:30pm on weekdays.

New Dispensary Opening Hours

Monday - Friday:
8:00am - 5:30pm

Saturday:
8:30am - 1:30pm

Sunday:
Closed



Dates for your diary

Thurs 21st May, 7pm

Cheshire Grasslands, Wheelock Hall Farm

A farm walk around Cheshire Grassland Society 2025 winner, and an opportunity to hear about their grassland management and its impacts on their dairy herd.

Tues 23rd - Fri 25th June

European Dairy Farmers Congress, Chester

See the flyer for more details and how to register, but this will be an exciting opportunity to connect with other dairy farmers from around Europe as well as hear and learn from some of the best in lectures and workshops.

Get in touch...



**nantwich
farm vets** LTD

Hurleston, Nantwich, Cheshire CW5 6BU



01270 610349



office@nantwichfarmvets.co.uk
orders@nantwichfarmvets.co.uk



www.nantwichfarmvets.co.uk

Follow us on ...

