

NEWSLETTER
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Dairy Cows with Unusual Eating Habits?

Summer 2010 has led to the increased prevalence of dairy cows eating stones, plastics, wood and clay. There are many reasons why this may be happening and you should investigate the cause if more than 25% of your cows are doing this. One possible cause is lack of 'long' fibre in the diet and this may also show up as low butterfats in the milk. The cow may possibly have a 'craving' for a hard substrate to chew on if there is a low level of effective fibre in the total diet. Try offering access to straw or hay.

Another possible cause could be deficiency of trace minerals but this should be affirmed with blood samples taken by your veterinary practitioner. High molybdenum soils are very common in Ireland and the presence of molybdenum in the grass that cows graze causes molybdenum induced deficiency of some trace minerals such as copper. A ginger/foxy colour coat is usually indicative that the level of molybdenum in the diet is high and is causing a problem with the mineral status of the cow.

Phosphorus deficiency has also been identified as a possible cause of these unusual eating habits in some herds. This can also be verified through blood testing. To date many herds have reported a significant improvement once they introduced an additional supply of phosphorus. You may ask why would a deficiency of phosphorus only have shown up in 2010? One theory is that over the last 10 years the fertiliser regime has changed dramatically, mainly due to environmental pressures and the cost of compound fertiliser. This may have led to low levels of phosphorus in grass and that is has now reached such a low level that it is not suffice to sustain high producing livestock such as dairy cows. The level of phosphorus required by an animal relates to production status so for example a milking cow has a much higher requirement for phosphorus than a replacement heifer. Phosphorus can be offered to cows through a hi-phosphorus feed in the parlour, feed a hi-phosphorus lactating cow mineral in a TMR mix.