

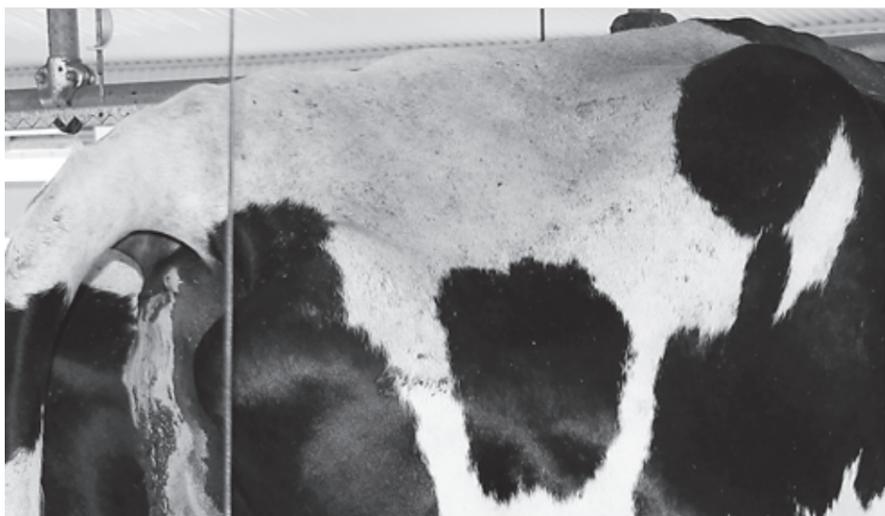
Valacta

Dairy Production Centre of Expertise
Quebec-Atlantic

*Dairy knowledge
at your fingertips*

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One more tool at hand: the human eye!



Rough, patchy and greasy-looking hair indicates that the animal is suffering from a deficiency or excessive stress.



A runny nose may be a sign of rumen instability.



Depending on whether it is hollow or filled out, this triangle on the animal's flank provides us with information about the animal's appetite and the digestibility of the ration.



As is the case in humans, a bowed head is an indication that something is amiss.

Steve Adam, agr.
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Greater productivity, heavy work load, increased responsibilities, high cost of mechanization, rapid increase in the computerization of dairy operations... In this whirlwind of activity, it sometimes happens—inadvertently—that we lose track of the essential element: our animals!

And yet, observing the behaviour and appearance of our cows helps us understand both their

language and the environment in which they live. This idea of observing animals from all angles originates mainly from Europe and is gradually gaining ground on this side of the Atlantic.

Since cows don't speak the language of humans, their body language becomes that much more informative. Current technological research is aimed at developing precision instruments to help dairy producers better detect the signals conveyed by their animals. But human observation and basic common sense remain the tools of choice, thus far unbeatable, for assessing the condition of

our cows. That means we have to pay attention and take time to watch our animals every day.

There are many signs that tell us something is amiss in our cows' immediate environment. Whether it's a question of comfort, stress—potential or actual—or feeding, an animal will always react by trying to adapt to its surroundings, which are often far removed from their "natural" state.

Every farm has a set of indicators, of varying number, that can be monitored directly on the animals, either at the herd level or on one animal in particular.

Herd observations are more relevant when the herd is in free-stall housing or out on pasture. In a free-stall barn, we can see if the animals occupy the whole barn or if they prefer a particular row of stalls. Is the ventilation there better? Is there more light? Are stall dimensions and comfort level adequate?

When it comes to individual cows, there are many indicators. Sometimes the signs are quite easy to figure out while in other cases interpretation is more complex.

Poor hair coat appearance (see upper left photo) can be a sign that an animal is suffering from stress of an environmental,

dietary or parasitic nature. Rough, patchy, greasy-looking hair, for example, indicates that the animal is suffering from a deficiency or excessive stress. The appearance of a young calf's coat tells us a great deal about its health status. A sleek, glossy, clean coat is a good indicator of an animal's health and well-being.

Some authors have noted that a runny nose (see upper right photo) or eyes can be a sign of compromised rumen stability, or even ruminal acidosis. Bleeding from the nose is quite well documented as one of the consequences of severe ruminal acidosis.

We can tell if the rumen is adequately filled by observing the triangular area located between the last rib, the backbone and the hip bone on the left hand side of the animal, where there are no organs between the skin and the rumen wall (see lower left photo). Is there a visible hollow there or not? A scoring system from 1 to 4 can be helpful when assessing rumen fill. A score of 1 indicates an empty rumen while a score of 4 corresponds to a full rumen. This system enables us to evaluate a cow's appetite, which is very important, particularly during the post-partum

period, when we want the rumen to be full. At the peak of lactation, the rate of passage of feed should be relatively high. That means we want a rumen that is full after feeding but which empties out quite frequently. The feed passage rate can also indicate the digestibility of the ration. Coarse forages tend to remain in the rumen for a very long time, giving the impression that the rumen is constantly full.

Observing the position of a cow's head and neck (see lower right photo) when the animal is lying down can tell us a great deal about her disposition. A cow with a drooping neck and chin resting on the bottom of the manger or on the floor in front of her cubicle tells us that something is wrong. When awake, a healthy cow will hold her head upright and have alert eyes and erect ears. She will also be ruminating her last meal.

These are only some of the telling behavioural signs seen in animals. Detailed observation of cows often makes it possible to detect problems and take corrective action before the situation worsens or becomes irremediable. All in all, the human eye is still a valuable tool in dairy production!

Valacta Workshop

"It pays to keep an eye on your cows!"

As of this spring, Valacta is offering a half-day workshop on cow observation. This hands-on workshop, which takes place in the barn, gives participants an opportunity to compare observations with other participants and the trainer. Participants work together to learn how to detect the cows' signals and identify ways to improve the comfort and well-being of their animals. For more information, visit www.valacta.com or contact a Valacta employee.