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Vet's Corner: weather and virus battles continue

Clients are looking to vets for a view on viruses and not forgetting the rain that seems never-ending, writes Conor Geraghty.

Coronavirus COVID-19 measures in place during the dairy sale at Corrin Mart. \ Donal O'Leary

Most vets have no expertise on COVID-19, but I understand how disease and viruses work in general. Pathogens are in competition with the animal much like a tug-o-war match.

Most of the time the animal's immunological system gives them the edge. Anything that weakens that system gives the advantage to the bacteria or viruses in the environment. The weather has a big part to play in that. When we have wet conditions in springtime animals that would ordinarily be turned outside to pasture end up being housed for longer.

This results in a number of issues that give disease the edge – more animals in sheds (calves and lambs) result in overcrowding, poorer air quality, buildup of pathogens and less favourable hygiene. Lambs and calves are more susceptible to disease also, which is why we see more sickness in this age group. Older dairy cows with less functional udders are more prone to E coli mastitis.

Much like COVID-19, the at-risk bracket are the old, very young and already compromised individuals.

What can be done at farm level during periods of bad weather like this? Firstly, hygiene is very important. Don't skimp on straw and clean and bed sheds regularly. Disinfect calving areas between use. Scrape and lime cubicles more frequently than normal. Ensure your colostrum management protocols are working.

Then give the animals the edge in this tug-o-war match – ensure they are fighting fit. Fluke, worms, lice, etc, are all added pressures on the animal. Feed dry cow minerals and feed some extra concentrate, especially if silage isn't over 70% DMD.

The weather will change and the animals will get out. It's about managing the situation until then. More importantly, managing the situation will reduce your stress so you are better placed to fight off any infections, including coronavirus.

Conor Geraghty MVB Cert DHH owns and runs FarmGate Veterinary Group, a six-vet large animal practice in Mountbellew, Co Galway. FarmGate Veterinary Group is part of XLvets. XLVets is a group of progressive practices who are working together to achieve a better future for agriculture and veterinary in Ireland. For information, see www.xlvets.ie