

## **Preventing Accidents When Cows Run Over People**

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In contrast to bulls that attack people due to male aggression, cows run over people due to fear. Cattle are herd animals and they often panic when they are left alone. Many accidents where people are struck by cows are caused by isolating a single animal. If a cow has to be taken out for doctoring, take a buddy along with her. She will stay calmer, if she has a friend with her.

Noise is very stressful to dairy cattle. Canadian researchers Joe Stookey and Jeffry Rushen found that yelling, whistling and screaming disturb cattle. Yelling and whistling will raise a cow's heart rate more than the sound of a gate slamming. Yelling near a cow's ear is almost as stressful as an electric prod. Cows can hear frequency sounds that people can not hear, so everyone that works with cattle should be quiet.

Handlers also need to understand the flight zone and the cow's point of balance. A young heifer that is not completely tame will back away when a person approaches and keep a safe distance. This is her flight zone (Figure 1). When she enters the milking herd her flight zone will gradually get smaller as she gets more relaxed and tame. Milking cows should have almost no flight zone. In the highest producing dairies the cows will allow people to touch them. In dairies where milkers and handlers are rough, the flight zone will be bigger. These cows will be less productive and more dangerous to handle.

A cow with a large flight zone may run over a person if she is cornered in an alley. She runs over the person in an attempt to get away, because the person is standing too close to her.

Cattle that are upset and agitated are more difficult and dangerous to handle than calm cows. A basic principle of handling cows is to not get them excited. Excited cows or heifers are harder to sort and they bunch together more tightly. Calm cows are easier to separate. If cows, heifers or calves become excited, give them an opportunity to calm down. It takes up to 30 minutes for cattle to calm down and their heart rates to return to normal. Even a wait of two or three minutes will allow the animals to calm down and be easier to move and sort.

Understanding the point of balance at the shoulder will make it easier to move cows. If the handler stands in front of this point of balance, the cow will go backward. If the handler is behind the point of balance the cow will go forward. A cow will move forward if the handler walks quickly past the point of balance in the opposite direction as the desired movement (Figure 2). The cow goes forward when the handler crosses the shoulder. It will work best if the handler walks quickly. If the handler walks slowly, the cow will just back up.

Understanding cow and bull behavior will help to reduce accidents. There is no way that cattle can be made perfectly safe, but the use of behavioral principles will reduce the risk.