

Understanding Cattle Behavior To Help Prevent Serious Dairy Accidents

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Two thirds of the serious accidents in which people are hurt by dairy cattle are caused by kicking cows and bull attacks. In a western state last year, three bull attacks and three kicking incidents by cows resulted in Workman's Compensation claims of over \$1,000. An understanding of cow and bull behavior can prevent serious accidents.

Prevention of Kicking Accidents

Specific cows gain reputations as "kickers". Usually these cows have been mistreated in the past and remember bad experiences. If they were slapped or hurt by a milker when they first entered the milking parlor, they will never forget it and have a tendency to kick when they are scared or frightened. Prevention of this learned behavior is best. Handle young heifers carefully and gently when first introduced into the milking parlor. If a heifer falls down in the parlor or is hit the first time she enters it, she may develop a permanent fear memory around a specific incident. For example, the cow may fear a person who wears a red baseball cap or men, in general. Dairy managers need to closely supervise employees to make sure cows are never mistreated.

Gentle treatment of dairy cows and good stockmanship will also improve milk production, according to Australian Paul Hemsworth and his associates. The most productive cows are cows that are relaxed when they are being milked. Dogs should never be used on a dairy for moving cattle. Cattle and calves that are bitten on the heels by dogs are more likely to kick and will lash out at anything that moves behind them due to a permanent fear memory.

Milkers and handlers must be careful not to surprise a cow when they walk up from behind. Cattle have 360 degree wide angle vision and can see around themselves, except for a small blind spot right behind their rear end. Care should be taken never to suddenly walk into the blind spot. Talk to the cow as you approach so that she knows you are there.

Preventing Bull Accidents

The most dangerous dairy bull is a bull that has not been properly socialized to his own kind. When a young bull calf becomes sexually mature at age two, he needs to challenge the top bull in the herd. If the bull calf has been raised alone and has not had the opportunity to interact with other cattle, he thinks he is a person and he wants to exert his dominance over the "herd".

Ed Price at the University of California found that bull calves raised in groups were much less likely to attack people than bull calves raised in individual pens. Bull calves raised on a cow were the least likely to attack. When they are raised with their own kind, they know who they are and they are less likely to think that people are part of the herd.

There is no such thing as a totally safe bull, but the risk of an attack can be reduced with proper management. When the calves are six to eight weeks old, they should be put in group pens. If there are no bull calves available for penmates, a young bull should be raised with steer calves that are older and heavier. Any sexually mature bull that charges a person, should be removed from a commercial dairy because he is too great a safety risk to the dairy personnel.

Never play butting games with calves. It is cute when they are young but very dangerous when they grow up. Never allow a bull calf to push his head up against you. Tell him to get back. If you want to pet the calf, stroke him under the chin, on the rear, or on the withers (shoulder). Stroke him anywhere except the forehead. Pressure on this area will encourage butting.

The major causes of bull attacks are mistaken identity or improper behavior that has been learned. A bull will perform a broadside threat prior to attack. He will stand sideways so the person or other bull can see how big and powerful he is. Sometimes a person can make a bull back off by responding with the human variation of a broadside threat which for people is a frontal stance. Alternatively, the person may just back slowly away from the bull. NEVER RUN away.

In dairies where bulls run loose in the cow pens, managers should be trained to notice aggressive postures. The bull should just move away along with other cows when the milkers approach. A bull that does a broadside threat to milkers should be culled.

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.