



## Understanding Dairy Cattle Behavior to Avoid Animal-Related Accidents on the Farm

Dairy producers and their employees are constantly dealing with dairy cattle, which exposes them to possible injury if they do not know how cattle behave and react to human presence. Cows have feelings: they are thirsty, hungry, feel pain and comfort. If cows are treated gently, they will respond favorably. On the other hand, if they are mistreated, they will refuse to cooperate. In general, forcing an animal to do something that she does not want to do can cause the animal to become scared and confused, which can lead to injuries both to the handler and to the animal. Studies have shown that cattle are responsible for about two-thirds of all injuries caused by farm animals, but also that more than half of the animal-related injuries were due to human error. A skilled cattle handler understands how cattle behave and can use that knowledge to make cows safely do what they want them to do.

### How can I “read” a cow’s body language?

You can get an idea of how a cow feels by looking at her tail. When the tail is hanging down, she is relaxed. When the tail is tucked between her legs, she is either in pain, scared or cold. If the tail is raised, she is exploring or alert to possible threats. When galloping, her tail is straight out.



Relaxed



Pain, scared or cold



Exploring or alert



Galloping

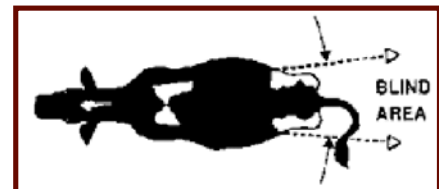
It is also important to observe the whole posture of the animal. A healthy animal will stretch, arching her back when she stands up and then return to her normal straight posture. If a cow is standing longer than normal with her back arched and her head low, that is a sign of discomfort.

### Do cows see color?

Cows are able to see colors and they are very sensitive to contrast. For example, if a cow sees a white line, a puddle or a shadow in the alley, most probably she will jump over it, as she may confuse it with a hole in the ground.

### Why do cows startle when I approach them from behind? Can they see me?

Cows have a wide field of vision, they can look backwards without moving their heads because their eyeballs are located on the sides of their heads. Cows have a blind spot located right behind them. If we position ourselves in that spot, cows can get nervous as they cannot see what is happening. Always try to avoid that “blind spot” when approaching a cow.



### **Are loud noises and shouting disturbing to cows?**

Yes. Cows are more sensitive to noises than humans, especially high pitched noises that can hurt their ears. Remember that high pitched sounds in the wild are used as alarm calls when a predator is around. For example, never yell near or at a cow. Loud noises can scare cows and may cause kicking, charging or running.

### **What are the signs a bull displays when he is upset?**

A bull may lower his head, shake it from side to side, and arch his back to show his greatest profile. He may also paw the ground and send dirt flying over his back. If you see this behavior, stay calm. Running can be seen by the bull as a threat. Back away slowly, always keeping an eye on the bull, until you can find a way out of the pen. If you retreat, most probably the bull will turn away. Always have a predetermined way out!!! Never trust a dairy bull, even if they look tame. Bulls can be deadly. Use special care when removing a cow in heat from a bull's pen. The bull feels that the pen is "his" and will try to keep the cow with him. Nowadays, many farms are eliminating the use of bulls, not only because of safety reasons, but also to improve genetics.



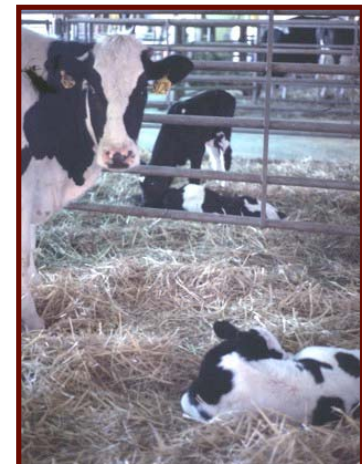
**Familiarize yourself with the threat signs displayed by a bull**

### **What about fresh heifers with their calves?**

Fresh cows with their calves may show a very strong maternal instinct and are often quite aggressive, as they may view humans as predators.

### **How should a heifer be introduced to the parlor for the first time?**

If possible, let the heifer enter the parlor for the first time on her own prior to freshening, so she can inspect it and become accustomed to it. Remember, first impressions are very important for future behavior!



**Fresh heifers can be very protective of their offspring**

### **Is a single animal more dangerous to handle than a group? Why?**

Cattle are social animals, function within a herd structure, and follow the leader. They like to be in groups because a group of animals has more chances to detect the presence of a predator than an individual animal. That is why an isolated cow gets stressed and is often dangerous. She will rejoin the herd. This is important to know because we sometimes need to isolate an animal for different procedures, such as pregnancy exams or foot trimming.

### **What is the safest way to approach an animal?**

Always let them know that you are there, you can talk to them, touch them gently on the rump or side. Never slap or punch an animal. Slapping or punching can trigger kicking and aggression.

Cows generally kick from the side that is painful. If a cow has mastitis in the left quarter, or has a sore left foot, try to approach her from the right side.

## What is the “flight zone”?

Animals react approaching humans by first observing their movements and then turning away to escape. If a cow turns away, it means that you entered their flight zone. A flight zone or safety zone is the space around a cow where she feels safe. The flight zone basically represents how close a person can get before the animal runs away. The size of the flight zone depends on the tameness of the animal. In dairy cows, it is about two meters.



**A dairy cow's flight zone can be 2m or less**

## How can I avoid getting injured by a cow?

Remember:

- Always move slowly around cattle, be patient!
- Never flap your arms or make quick movements, this can spook a cow.
- Announce yourself when approaching a cow by talking or touching her gently.
- Never approach a cow from behind, you'll be standing in her blind spot.
- Always have a designated exit when entering the bull pen.
- Avoid having bulls in your farm, but if you have them, never handle him alone.
- Never turn your back on a bull.
- Only trained animal handlers should work with cattle.
- If you have to treat a cow, make sure that she is properly restrained.
- If you have to handle a newborn calf, do so after removing the dam from the pen.
- If you have to assist an animal that is sick or injured, make sure to protect yourself from any disease that they may have. Use gloves and wash your hands after assisting them.
- Always use extreme care when entering a pen if a bull is around or ask somebody with more experience to go with you.