

# Handling Down Cows

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Properly handling down cows is one of the most important responsibilities for dairy herd managers and employees. How you care for compromised animals that depend on you is a reflection of your character, values and priorities.

Disabled cattle must be handled humanely at all times, period. Maintain a positive attitude and respond to the challenge of a down cow with emotions in check. Avoid wasting time playing the blame game.

Down animals must never be dragged mechanically with direct attachment to body parts while alive. Doing so is likely to result in direct injury to the animal at the point of attachment. Friction between the skin and the ground or cement while dragging will cause abrasions or bruising. These indirect skin injuries can lead to significant infections. Remember, skin is the largest immune organ and every effort should be made to avoid compromising it. Consult your herd veterinarian to establish or review your protocols/procedures for handling down cows. Every plan should include "who, when, where, what and how" you respond to down animals on your farm.

**Who?** Establish a chain of command and who must be notified when a cow is unable to get up. Be sure everyone, including the employees, managers, herd veterinarian and owners, all understand their role.

**When?** Immediately, don't wait. Disabled animals should be treated as an emergency, not something that can be taken care of later. Research has shown cows left lying on concrete for several hours can cause pressure damage to their hind legs, creating a greater challenge for her to recover.

**Where?** Assess the site and how it might affect your response...maternity pen? stanchion/freestall? holding area? barn yard or pasture? Every situation has unique challenges.

**What?** Consider the cow's history: age; days fresh; heat cycle; pregnancy status; current or prior lameness, metabolic or other medical conditions. A clinical diagnosis by an assigned responsible person should be made and appropriate treatment administered. Manually help position the cow to succeed, make sure there are no obstructions in front of her that prevent her from lunging forward to get up. Give her time to rest and regain strength; add lime or sand on concrete surfaces to improve footing.

**The How** of moving down cows: The Wisconsin Veterinary Medical Association (WVMA) has a guiding principle for food animal welfare that says, "Non-ambulatory animals must not be dragged mechanically with direct attachment to body parts to avoid direct damage to the animal."

When moving down cows, they should first be placed on a suitable surface that prevents direct and indirect injury to the animal while being moved. Cows can be manually positioned onto a suitable surface with simple mechanical devices such as pulleys or winches.

**Follow-up Evaluation & Treatment** If the cow is not standing 12 hours after being moved to a proper recovery area, call your veterinarian for a diagnosis and prognosis. A trained veterinarian can also help avoid needless suffering by making a timely euthanasia recommendation based on his/her findings.

The pictures show several acceptable surfaces for moving down cows (rubber mats, wide conveyer handling belts, plywood, or even an old stone boat). If a loader bucket is used, never "scoop up" the animal while driving; instead, bundle the cow using a rope and halter, then role her gently back into the bucket (see photos).



Rubber Mat



Conveyer Belt



Stone Boat



Plywood



"Bundle" Cow before Rolling