



Alternatives to tail docking

There is little scientific evidence to justify or support the use of tail docking for animal health reasons (see the associated fact sheet - Myths about tail docking). Most farmers now use other practical alternatives – that have minimal impact on their time or milking routines and do not compromise the welfare of the cows.

This Fact Sheet focuses on the common alternatives to tail docking and provides a checklist of the key management practices that can help with tail management in the dairy.

What are the alternatives?

Switch trimming (tail hair trimming)

Trimming the long hair growing along the tail and on the tail brush is an extremely effective way to minimise the workplace 'hazards' of a flicking tail. A well-trimmed tail eliminates dags, will stay cleaner and poses less risk to the operator.

The tail hair can be trimmed using hand shears or electric trimmers. Electric (battery-operated) trimmers are very popular, as they make the task of trimming simple, easy and quick (Refer to associated fact sheet - How to trim a cow's tail). Shoof also has available through rural supplies stores the TailWell™ Power Tail Trimmer which is designed to be secured to a cordless drill, takes only 3 or 4 seconds per tail, and is easily accomplished during milking.

Trimming is best performed prior to the wet months of the year. Trimming is required twice a year for most cows.

Fly control

Flies, particularly the biting flies, can be a major source of irritation for cows, causing them to flick their tails. Reducing fly numbers will greatly reduce the need for cows to flick their tails and, therefore, reduce the hazard to the milking operator. The use of electric fans, fly baits and traps around the dairy are effective in controlling fly numbers at milking. Several chemical-based products are also registered for this use.



The TailWell™ Power Tail Trimmer in action

Tail clips

Purpose-made tail clips are available from stockists of animal grooming equipment and are a cheap and simple way to deal with the odd cow that persistently flicks her tail.

Improving cow comfort

Cows that are comfortable during milking tend to flick their tails less, and pass less manure and urine in the dairy. A comfortable milking can be accomplished by:

- **Adequate cow spacing:** Allow cows sufficient space on the platform to minimise contact with adjacent herd mates. Stall gates and individual feed bins can alleviate negative interactions.
- **Temperature:** Cows find it difficult to cope in hot, humid conditions. Providing good ventilation and shade from direct sunlight can give respite from these uncomfortable conditions.
- **Feeding in the dairy:** Providing feed during milking can have a relaxing effect on cows, but can also result in fighting between neighbouring cows. Effective partitioning (such as bail dividers and head stalls) between cows prevents aggression and improves cow comfort.

- **Noise:** Intermittent and/or unexpected loud noises can unsettle cows. Loud noise is unpleasant and unsafe for the operators too. Insulating the noise produced by the vacuum pump(s) and regulator(s) is a good starting point. Also aim to eliminate the banging caused by metal gates clashing.
- **Milking machine function:** Cows that willingly accept the attachment of the milking cluster will be more settled and less prone to tail flicking. A consistent cluster attachment technique is as important as a properly functioning milking unit. Regular milking machine maintenance and servicing, and the timely replacement of liners, results in comfortable milking. Attaching clusters with minimal air admission in a confident and proficient way sends the correct signals to the cow.

Shed Design

Platform design can have a dramatic effect on cow comfort. Aspects such as platform width, surface, lighting and cow spacing affect cow behaviour during milking. Kick rails should be 550-650 mm above the platform, with the breech rail at around 800 mm. Splash guards and manure gutters mounted on the breech rail will keep most of the manure (and flicking tails) away from the operator. Manure gutters should include a grate to stop the tail from 'scooping' out manure and running water to wash away the waste.

The platform should be at a comfortable working height (850-1000 mm) and an overhang on the nib wall will allow the operator to get in close behind the cows, so reducing the need to bend and put the face in harm's way.

Having the cows positioned close against the breech rail is important and a 3% slope away from the pit on the platform floor will also help present the udders for the operator. Easy access to hoses helps keep the working area clean and reduces the risk of manure being flicked by the tail.

More ways to improve cow and operator comfort

There are many simple things that can be done to improve operator comfort and help keep tails and udders clean, without resorting to tail docking. Assessing the operator's and the cow's environment is the first step towards making milking more comfortable and hassle free. Following is a checklist to help identify areas that may need attention.

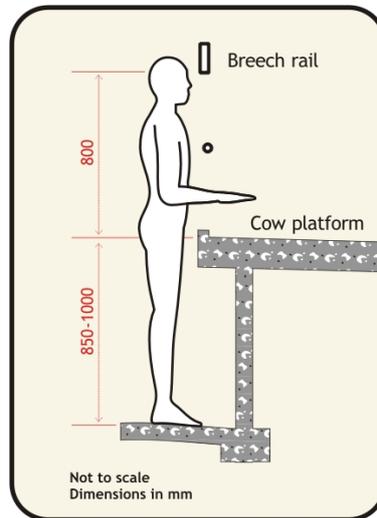


Figure: CowTime Guidelines 2003

Related tail docking fact sheets

Myths about tail docking
How to trim a cow's tail

Further information

Klindworth, D., Campbell, J. and Greenall, R. 2003: CowTime Guidelines for milk harvesting. Dairy Research and Development Corporation. www.cowtime.com.au

Morgan, B. 2007: Review of technical materials regarding tail docking in dairy cattle. (Ed. Hakim, G.). Dairy Australia, Southbank, Victoria.

Shoof International Ltd. 2011: The TailWell™ Power Tail Trimmer. <http://tailwell.com/index.php>

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Checklist of ways to improve comfort

Ask yourself...

Laneways and Paddocks		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Ok <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Attention required
Laneways	Are muddy areas well controlled?	
Paddock entrances	Are they congested, narrow, boggy?	
Grass coverage	Do cows lie in muddy areas?	
The Dairy		
Yard	Are the cows cramped?	
	Do cows enter a clean yard?	
Cow flow	Do cows enter the platform willingly?	
	Is there sufficient room on the platform?	
In-place feeding	Is feed available during milking?	
	Can cows fight for each other's feed ration?	
Noise	Are there loud – intermittent or continuous – noises?	
Lighting	Do cows and operators have sufficient light?	
Manure diversion	Are urine splash guards and or manure gutters available?	
Water	Is there ready access to a low-pressure, medium-flow rate water to clean dirt and manure away from work area?	
Temperature	Are there effective mechanisms to control high temperatures and humidity in the dairy?	
Milking Management		
Trimming tail hair	Is there a routine/equipment for trimming tail hair?	
	Are operators trained on how to correctly trim tail hair?	
Trimmers	Are the trimming devices regularly maintained and kept sharp?	
Cow handling	Do operators handle cows in a calm and consistent manner?	
Cup attachment	Are the routines consistent and proficient?	
	Can the operator easily reach the teats?	
Heifers	Is there a gentle and consistent routine for introducing heifers into the milking herd?	
Flies & Worms		
Fly control	Are fans, fly papers, fly buckets, fly baits, zappers used?	
Helminth control	Is there an effective control program in place?	
Diet		
Dietary management	Is the diet balanced?	
Feed additives	Are these required?	