

# THE COMFORT column

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# A FIVE-STEP plan

Controlling lameness is vital to dairy farm profitability because it affects everything that a cow does on any given day. A clinically lame cow can cost a dairy producer a significant amount of money as a result of decreased milk production and fertility, treatment and labour costs, and early culling.

Addressing lameness is often challenging since the cause is multifactorial, involving factors such as housing conditions, management practices, nutrition, and the environment. By establishing and maintaining an effective, ongoing programme to identify, prevent, and treat lameness, dairy producers can minimise lameness in their operations.

**Table 1** The locomotion scoring system (source: Sprecher *et al.*, 1997)

Score	Description	Spinal curvature: standing	Spinal curvature: walking
<b>1. Normal</b>	The cow stands and walks normally with a level back and makes long, confident strides.		
<b>2. Mildly lame</b>	The cow stands with a flat back, but arches when walking and the gait is slightly abnormal.		
<b>3. Moderately lame</b>	The cow stands and walks with an arched back and gives short strides with one or more legs. A slight sinking of the dewclaws in the limb opposite the affected limb may be evident.		
<b>4. Lame</b>	The cow's back is arched when standing and walking. She favours one or more limbs, but can still bear some weight on them. Sinking of the dewclaws is evident in the limb opposite the affected limb.		
<b>5. Severely lame</b>	There is pronounced arching of the back. The cow is reluctant to move, with almost complete weight transfer off the affected limb.		

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## CONTINUES

### TAKE THE FIRST STEP

The first step in establishing an effective lameness reduction plan is to determine the incidence and severity of lameness within the herd. Locomotion scoring (Sprecher *et al.*, 1997) is a simple and useful tool to improve lameness recognition, and uses a scale of one to five which is based on observations of the cow standing and walking, with special emphasis on the cow's back posture. The system focuses on back arching as evidence of weight redistribution due to the animal trying to offset pain in the lame claw (Table 1). Research shows that spinal curvature has a very high correlation to the presence of claw lesions.



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### KEY POINTS TO CONSIDER WHEN SCORING COWS:

- Score at least 50% of the herd every two to four months to assess the impact of management, environment, and nutrition changes.
- Score cows when standing and walking, not when they're being pushed.
- Cows should walk normally and not run when being scored.
- Ensure cows are on a flat, level surface with adequate traction to prevent slipping.

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### STEPPING FORWARD

Through the use of locomotion scoring, dairy producers and their labourers may be able to catch lameness in the initial stages and treat it before more serious lesions develop. The objective is to identify cows scoring a three or higher as candidates for corrective trimming and treatment. Knowledge of lameness incidence and severity also provides a benchmark for measuring intervention effectiveness, to determine whether corrective steps are producing adequate reductions in the number of lame animals. If the corrective action plan is effective, locomotion scores should improve in less than two weeks in the case of infectious lesions such as hairy heel wart. Non-infectious lesions such as white lines and sole ulcers may only show improvement after several weeks or months since horn growth is relatively slow.

Early identification through locomotion scoring, corrective trimming using a professionally qualified hoof trimmer, paying attention to cow comfort, and ensuring proper nutrition can improve overall claw health and positively affect performance and profitability. [mpo](#)