



DISBUDDING

Horned dairy cattle pose significant risks to both humans and animals on the dairy farm, and the removal of these horns is done for the safety of the cattle and their caregivers.

The best practice in the industry is to conduct disbudding of the horn-growing tissue before eight weeks of age – before the horn bud has attached to the calf’s skull. The term disbudding refers to the destruction or excision of horn-producing cells before skull attachment, while dehorning involves the excision of the horn after skull attachment.

Scientific research indicates that both disbudding and dehorning are painful procedures, and studies have shown pain mitigation use during these procedures benefits calf welfare.

Therefore, it is also best practice in the industry that a local anesthesia, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAID) and/or sedatives be administered when disbudding.

HISTORY OF DISBUDDING IN THE FARM PROGRAM

In Versions 1-3 (2009-2019) of the National Dairy FARM Animal Care Program, the recommended best practice was that “medical procedures [which included disbudding] are performed at the earliest age possible and with appropriate use of analgesics and/or anesthetics.”

Since January 1, 2020, the National Dairy FARM Program has required dairy producers to provide pain mitigation for disbudding and develop an effective pain management protocol with the farm’s veterinarian for the procedure. Additionally, current program requirements are that the calves should be disbudded prior to eight weeks of age.

ADDITIONAL TALKING POINTS

- Cow horns can become dangerous weapons in areas where cows are in groups together, such as in the barn or milking parlor, putting themselves and farm employees at risk.
- One way to prevent cows from injuring their caretakers or each other, is to prevent the growth of horns prior to development.
- Farmers should follow procedures established by the [American Veterinary Medical Association](#) and the [American Association of Bovine Practitioners](#) when they disbud.



- Introducing the polled, or hornless, trait in dairy cattle breeds will take generations to become widespread and may have unintended consequences for the animals' overall health and well-being due to inbreeding.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- [FARM Quick Convos: Pain Management for Disbudding](#)
- [National Dairy FARM Animal Care Manual](#) (pages 68, 69, and 115)
- [American Association of Bovine Practitioners - Dehorning Guidelines](#)
- [American Veterinary Medical Association](#)
- [“Dehorning: A Humane Practice Focused on Cow Safety” \(ADA Mideast video\)](#)

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

IS DISBUDDING A CRUEL PROCESS?

Before eight weeks of age, horn buds are not fused to the calf's skull. Disbudding of horn buds before they develop is considered the industry best practice with the proper use of anesthesia and/or analgesics. This results in only minimal and transient distress for the calf. In contrast, the injury caused by dehorning a fully-grown horn can be traumatic, which is why disbudding is a responsible animal welfare practice.

CAN POLLED GENETICS END THE NEED FOR DISBUDDING AND DEHORNING?

There is limited availability of polled genetic options in the U.S. dairy bull herd. Using just one narrow breeding line of cattle with polled genetics that excludes a wider range of breeding stock, could have unanticipated consequences for milk quality and animal health. Hornless dairy animals will become increasingly available to breed over time, but this is a long-term process that will unfold over decades.

Rather than rely exclusively on polled genetics, the dairy industry's National Dairy FARM program recommends that farmers continue to disbud calves and work with their veterinarians to mitigate the pain caused by the disbudding process.