

The Tale of Trimming Tails

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It is Spring, and we are not done yet. As it has been snowing or raining the majority of the month (and yes, it is late April), we should consider the challenges that this time of year brings to our cows and our producers as well in terms of maintaining stalls and/or cows clean.

Today, dairy farms must implement good management practices to be more productive and obtain higher quality products. One of these practices can be simple as maintaining a clean and trimmed tail. Association between legs, udder hygiene, and mastitis has been shown in previous studies – the dirtier the cow more prone it is to have a mastitis case. It is important to remember that cow's mastitis is an inflammatory response of the mammary gland tissue due to physical trauma, but in most cases caused by bacteria infections originating in the environment that will reduce milk production, increase costs and eventually lead to culling.

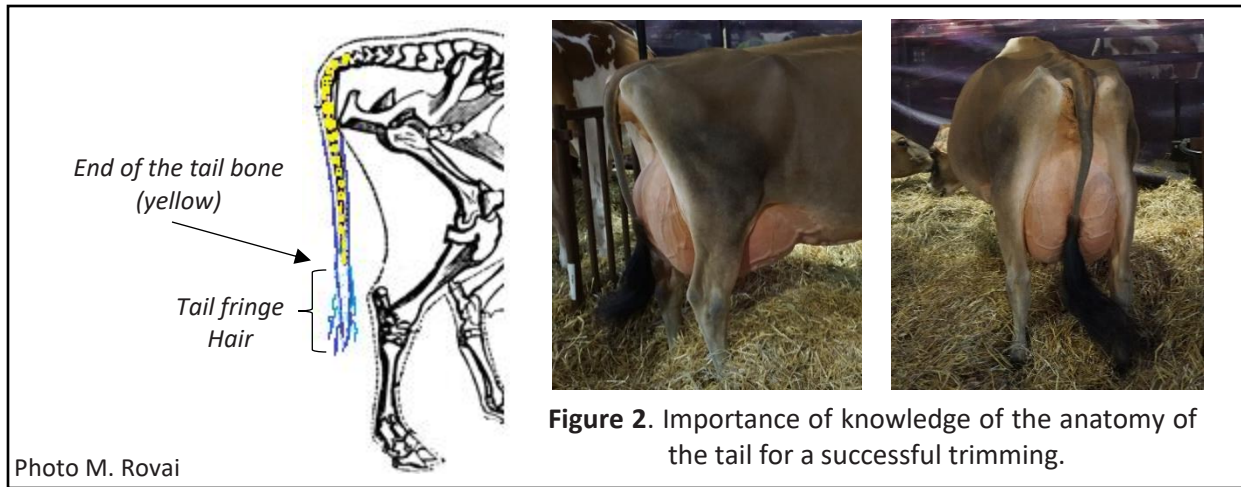
Cows often dirty their tails with manure and urine. The fecal matter that accumulates on the tail or in the udder hair, could contaminate the mammary glands (**Figure 1**). To prevent the tails from becoming a constant focus of infection, it is recommended to regularly trim the hair around the tail.



Therefore, preventive methods to eliminate infections risk are a daily task. One of these practices that must be considered and applied in each herd is to keep the tail clean and free from all types of sources of infection. It is a task that will not take much time, and although some see it as merely esthetic, they will realize that it is a good preventive practice to achieve better hygiene and units' attachment during milking.

Trimming the tail hair is a very simple practice but trimming the udder hair requires more attention and care since it is usually done with a flaming process (singe) done by an expert or trained person with enough experience who will only burn the hair and avoid teat damage.

The cow's tail. Before starting the tail trimming process, it is important to recognize the location of the end of the tailbone (base of the tail) to avoid injuries. Once there is familiarity with the base of the tail, you can continue with the tail trough (**Figure 2**).



The presence of a dirty tail can also compromise the milking process. It is not rare to observe that cows with long hair and accumulated manure in their tail fringe slow down the milking routine (**Figure 3**). Milkers will need to avert the tail to reach teats for pre-dipping, stripping, wipe off, and units attachment. Sometimes, they will even hold the tail to have full gland access. Due to a dirty tail, these interruptions may interfere with the lag time needed for milk ejection and proper udder cleaning. In addition, the target when treating the cow for mastitis or at dry-off is to remove organic matter, especially manure, from the teat end to assure that proper teat end cleaning will not jeopardize the treatment of any existing mammary and/or prevention of new infections.



When is the best time for tail trimming? It depends on the farm schedule, tail fringe trimming can be done while cows are in the milking parlor, locked up for herd check, or during hoof trimming practices.

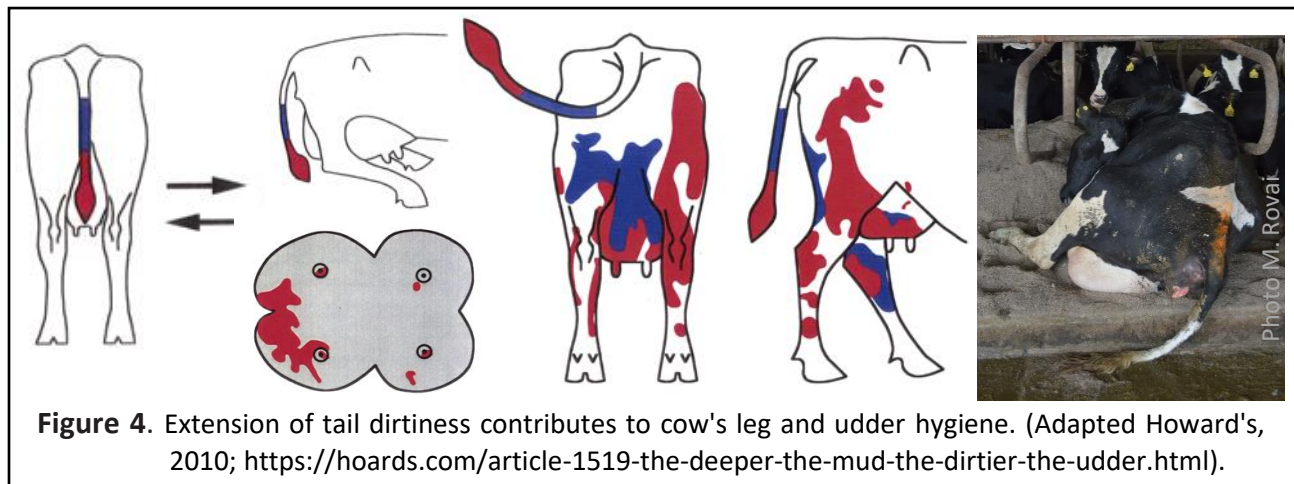
Tail trimming may take around 20 to 60 seconds per animal, depending on the tool used. There is no need to be tail trimming all cows on the same day, and the farm can establish this routine just for a few cows per day or over in a given period.

Some management practices also include trimming the tails and udder singe before dry-off to avoid having dirty tails and udder during the transition period. Other producers will choose to perform singe and fringe trim as they freshen.

The frequency of tail trimming will depend on the personnel available and trained at the dairies. Some dairies will trim tails once a year to every three months. It will also depend on the housing and stall cleaning conditions.

Ade et al. (2010) showed in an experiment how the cow contaminates her udder and teats with mud and manure while moving to the milking parlor, walking in the pen alleys, or standing/laying in the stalls. This study tracked the cow's movements and the extension of the dirtiness move from the tail to the udder, legs, and sides. For that, they painted the first 10 centimeters (about four inches) from the ground up using red color and an additional 10 centimeters in blue color.

After tail painting, cows were encouraged to walk around the pen. In **Figure 4**, the simulation dirt with red and blue color illustrates the extension of the possible tail dirt through the back of the cow, including the legs and udder.



Devices used for a tail hair clip. In the market, there are tail trimmer options (**Figure 5**):

- 1) *Cattle scissors*. The use of scissors is a cheap and easy method, but depending on how many cows you are tail trimming, it causes hand cramps. The market price is around \$20-50.
- 2) *Livestock English type shears*. Double bow, spring-loaded action automatically opens blades after each cut. The market price is around \$15-30.
- 3) *TAILWELL 2 tail trimmer* (tailwell.com). This cordless drill attachment is used to trim the tail hair using circular blades that rotate, trimming the tail hair all the way up the tail. Producers

using this device have mentioned that if the tail hair is loaded with dry manure, this device will not work properly without a pre-cutting of the tail hair. The market price is around \$550.

4) *Cattle electric clippers*. The cordless or corded hair clippers are intended to be used for animal grooming. These trimmers are easy to operate and make the task quick to perform. They are especially handy when access to power points is limited, or the working area is wet. The market price is around \$200 -350.

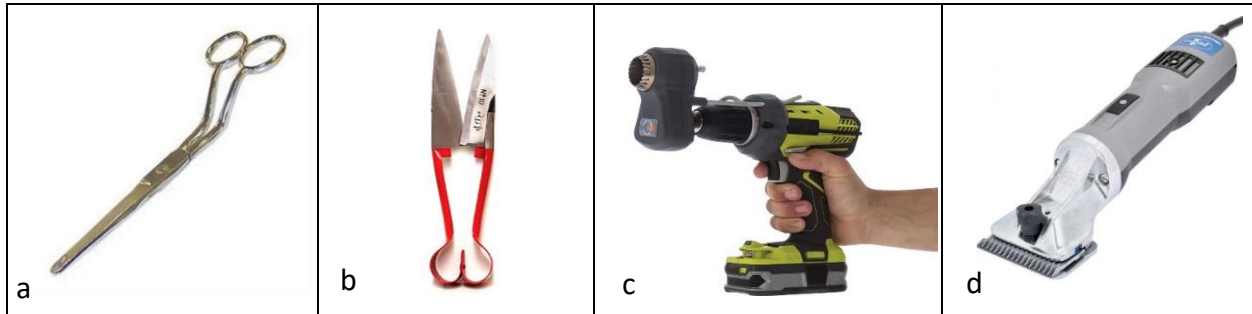


Figure 5. Examples of trimming available tools that can be used for tail hair removal: a. Cattle scissor, b. shear; cordless tail trimmer, d. electric clipper.

The cleaning of your trimming scissors and other device blades after every cut is critical since it will reduce the build-up of hair and manure, which may compromise the cutting performance.

We all know that it pays off to follow preventive measures than curative health protocols. Cows in a clean and comfortable environment will provide clean milk, and the trimming of the udder and tail hair (**Figure 6**) would facilitate the cleaning of the cows and provide a cleaner environment for the milkers. There is no risk of injury to the cow if the employee is trained to use the right equipment for tail fringe trimming.

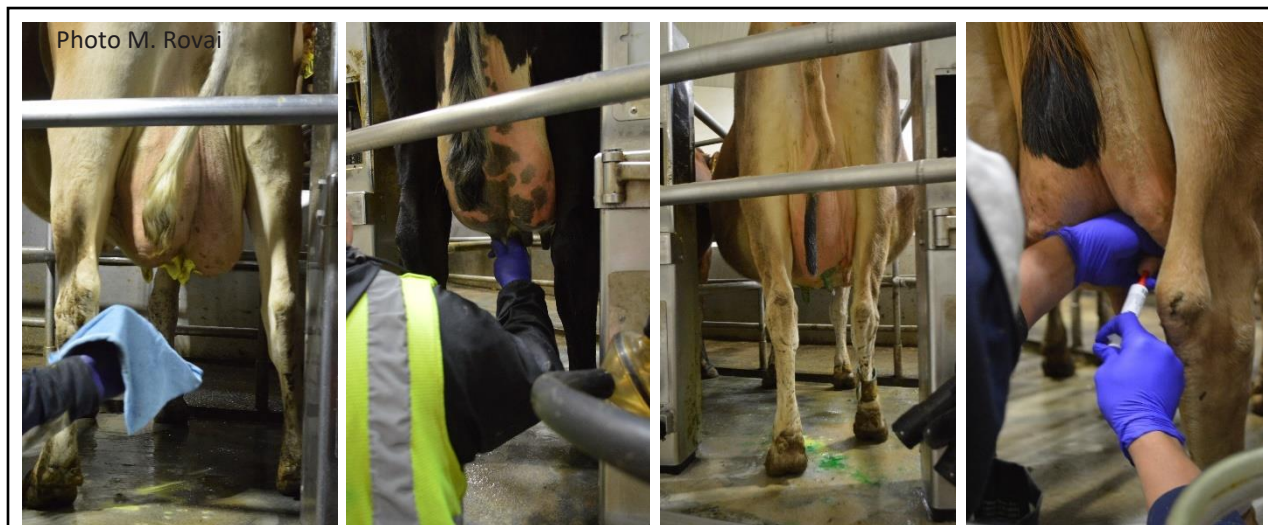


Figure 6. Examples of a clean environment with clean or trimmed tails for performing various tasks.

Let us know if you need a specific protocol or guidance for sharing with your employees and colleagues. We will be glad to help. You may contact us at:

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