Early Mastitis Detection Is Important  
Dr. Donald E. Pritchard  
Extension Dairy Specialist, North Carolina State University

All dairy producers know that early detection of intramammary infections is important for selecting and implementing proper therapy. Unfortunately, most infections are not detected until they become clinical, and by then extensive and costly damage can result. About 2½ years ago I wrote an article about research that had looked at using the California Mastitis Test (CMT) on fresh cows as an early lactation screening tool for detecting subclinically infected quarters. Another cow-side somatic cell count (SCC) monitoring method is now available to help producers detect subclinical udder infections.

To use the California Mastitis Test (CMT), a sample of milk from each quarter is squirted into a four compartment paddle, a measured amount of blue reagent is added to the milk sample, and then the degree of gelling that occurs in the sample of milk is subjectively scored. While each test does not cost much to run, it has some limitations. Since only subjective ratings are made instead of obtaining actual SCCs, the CMT may not be accurate enough for some producers, and the CMT requires a small amount of time to conduct which can slow down parlor throughput. These limitations can be especially important in large herds.

The new cow-side screening method uses an electronic device that actually counts the somatic cells in the milk sample, thus providing an objective rating (rather than subjective as with the CMT). This testing method requires about the same amount of time to run as the CMT, and can be used just as the CMT to check the milk of all fresh cows on day 3 or 4 of lactation for early detection of subclinical udder infections. The electronic device can also be used for testing the milk from strings of cows or the bulk tank for somatic cell levels, checking the recovery status of treated quarters, checking cows at time of dry-off for udder infection status, or to periodically check the milk of every cow in the herd. (Having SCCs run on the entire herd through the DHIA program is another, and I think more preferable, way of obtaining monthly entire herd SCC information.) While the CMT can also be used in the ways listed, the electronic device should provide more usable information because it reports actual SCC numbers. Since the cost of the new electronic device and the supplies required for each sample test are considerably higher than for the CMT, the device may be more applicable for use in large herds in which the investment cost is spread over more animals.

Dairy producers need to continually monitor the udder health status of their cows. By using the CMT or a more accurate electronic device, timely on-farm udder infection information can be obtained quickly for use in making management decisions. Both methods can be effective management tools for helping producers realize more profit from their dairy business. I encourage producers to discuss early mastitis monitoring methods with their veterinarian, extension agent, milk handler field representative, equipment supplier or dairy consultant.