

Section A

Animal Health

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Metabolic disease in beef cows

Metabolic disease can contribute to very significant losses in beef cows. The incidence of the various diseases varies from farm to farm, from year to year. The effects of the drought on the East Coast will have resulted, in general, in cows of lower body weight and condition score at calving. It will also have resulted in lower pasture covers for cows. It is likely that on most farms pre and post-calving feeding of beef cows will be restricted.

It is difficult to make predictions concerning occurrence of these diseases but the following rules of thumb apply. Some solutions and methods of treatment are provided.

Transit Tetany

This problem occurs in pregnant beef cows when they are trucked over reasonable distances. It can also occur when feed is temporarily restricted to cows before calving. Affected cows are usually recumbent but not in distress. They respond well to injections of calcium borogluconate. Following trucking, be careful that no other injuries are preventing the cow from rising. We have also seen the condition when cows have been stressed by suddenly break-feeding unsettled cows behind an electric fence. Note that this is a *calcium* not a *magnesium* problem.

Milk Fever

This condition generally occurs in aged cows in the period 24 hours before until 48 hours after calving. It is more prevalent in cows in **good** condition. It almost never affects first calvers.

Lesser affected cows may be sitting undistressed showing weakness and an inability to stand.

Cows eventually stretch themselves out in lateral recumbency and bloat. Inevitably some cows are found dead with rumen contents discharging from their mouth and nose.

Milk Fever can be difficult to prevent, especially if the herd is over-conditioned. Feeding magnesium oxide prior to calving may reduce the incidence of this disease. Restricting the amount of grass and supplementing with hay or silage may decrease the incidence of milk fever.

Grass Staggers

Grass staggers (low blood magnesium) is a very significant cause of death in lactating beef cows throughout New Zealand most years. This disease is most common in cows which have been calved three to eight weeks. It seldom affects first calvers. It often occurs when feed is constricted, or when cows run out of feed in a paddock. It may be more common this year because feed supply to lactating cows will be less than required on many farms.

Cows store very little magnesium in their bodies. Therefore daily intake of adequate amounts is very important. Various stress factors and inclement weather often result in outbreaks of staggers.

Affected cows are often found dead. Affected cows are very difficult to treat and even the ones saved initially subsequently die! Prevention is the key.

Prevention of staggers is often difficult for the hill country farmer. Prevention is aimed at supplying a daily source of magnesium. Magnesium oxide is the supplement of choice. It can be spread over pasture, hay or silage at the rate of 50 to 60gm per cow per day. Some farmers make up licks containing salt, magnesium and molasses. Others supply drums of Himag with a lickwheel. Salt blocks are probably not particularly effective. Providing these methods are started early enough (pre-calving) and continued on a daily basis they are often adequate for preventing clinical staggers.

In preventing this disease it is essential to plan, budget, and allocate an adequate feeding regime to lactating beef cows. The calving date can be very important in allowing the feed supply and feed demand to be at least equated. The use of nitrogen on calving areas can assist in providing adequate feed. However, the magnesium content of rapidly growing pastures can be low. It is now more common for farmers to adopt these methods than to shut up large areas of autumn-saved pasture. Sometimes there is feed in the paddock but suckling cows will not go and fossick it out. They instead hang about gateways, camp areas etc and if left in this situation a day or two long, they may keel over with staggers.

Grass staggers therefore can be minimised by supplying a good ration of quality feed to lactating cows on a daily basis.

The Weak Cow/Thin Cow Syndrome

There is a syndrome which results in cows going down before calving. These cows will usually stand and graze once they are lifted without any other treatment. The problem tends to occur in the last three weeks of pregnancy and not all affected cows are thin by any means.

Some of these cows have twins and others a big single calf. It seems that they are simply unable to take in sufficient (or are not provided with) high quality feed in late pregnancy.

Some of these cows have ketosis. These cows are salvageable if they are treated early with short-acting steroids to induce calving. High-energy feeds must be provided.

If you have any of these cows take a good look at the dietary intake of the whole herd as it probably needs to be increased.

It is essential to consult your veterinarian if you are having trouble with metabolic disease in your beef cows. The vet should visit the property so the exact nature of the problem can be determined and the appropriate remedial measures put in place.

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