



Keep Grass Tetany at Bay

By Joe Snyder

Grass tetany is sporadic and unpredictable and always an emergency requiring immediate medical attention. Cows in the early stages of grass tetany should be handled gently to avoid stress and exertion. Anything producing excitement can cause sudden death.

Cows that have tetany are likely to get it again later in the season or in later years. Yet, these animals may continue to be high producers.



The disease results from a low blood

magnesium level in cows. It is most likely to occur on pastures grown on soils that are low in magnesium and high in potassium. Rapidly growing, lush grasses are the most dangerous. Heavily fertilizing pastures with nitrogen and potassium (potash) greatly increases the risk.

Grass tetany occurs most often in the early to mid-spring following a cool period when grasses are lush and growing rapidly. It sometimes occurs in the fall with new growth of small cereal grains and cool-season grasses.

It is most common in older cows that have just given birth to calves, but may affect young or dry cows and growing calves.

Symptoms

Symptoms include (roughly in this order): grazing away from the herd, decreased milk yield, nervousness, restlessness, irritability, loss of appetite, weakness,

disorientation, twitching skin (especially on the face, ears and flanks), wide-eyed and staring, uncoordinated and staggering, collapsing, thrashing, head thrown back, comatose and death.

Prevention and Treatment

There are only a few hours between clinical signs and death, so prevention is the best option. Avoid grazing cattle on new grass until it is 4-6 inches tall because magnesium is less available in very immature plants. Use grass-tetany hazard pastures for steers and dry stock, and legume hay or high-legume pastures for lactating cows. Delay nitrogen fertilizing until after initial spring grazing.

Supplement magnesium while cattle are grazing high-risk forages. Consult your vet for the best mineral mix for your area.

Other tips:

- Add legumes to grass pastures.
- Feed roughage to cattle 10 days to two weeks before turning them out for the pasture season.
- Pasture cattle should be observed at least twice a day when they are first turned out to grass.
- The state soil testing lab can provide information on the danger of tetany on pastures and recommend corrective fertilization practices. Provide regular forage samples for analysis.

Sources: USDA, University of Florida, West Virginia University Extension, Kansas State University, Purdue University, South Dakota State University, University of Illinois

Tools to Prevent Calf Scours

By John Maas, DVM, MS, University of California, Davis

Here are a few nonmedical techniques to use in your calf scours prevention program. Your veterinarian can provide you with information that is specific to your herd.

1. Calve the heifers earlier than the main herd in clean fields. Heifers have lower quality colostrum and lower amounts. Their calves are more susceptible and isolation helps.
2. Try to calve when it is not wet or muddy in the fields.
3. Do not bring in outside cattle during calving season. They can bring in diseases your cattle have no immunity against. Bringing in dairy calves for cows that lose a calf can lead to scours outbreaks.
4. Treat sick calves only after handling the well calves — never before. Disinfect all balling guns or esophageal feeders after treating sick calves, use disposable gloves, wash your clothes and equipment after treating scouring calves, etc. You can carry the “bugs” on your clothes and equipment and cause an outbreak.
5. Isolate sick calves and their cows to a separate area to avoid the build-up of pathogens in the main herd.
6. Try to avoid feeding hay when the calves are very young. This concentrates the cattle and their feces on the hay feeding areas and increases the load of “bugs.” Use good pastures or fields put aside during the first two-three weeks of the calves’ lives. Feeding cottonseed meal or soybean meal with 30-40% salt in feeders can be a good way to supplement at this time.