



Calf Rearing Fact Sheet: Calf health

Internal parasites

Key Points

1. Larvae are ingested in pasture and as adults attach themselves to the intestinal wall and cause tissue damage.
2. Calves are susceptible to worms after weaning and the damage they cause to the wall of the intestine means that calves can have significantly reduced weight gains. Usually shows up on calves as a dirty backside. Can be mistaken for Coccidiosis (see Fact Sheet 2.9).
3. Drench before faecal egg counts get too high.
4. Oral combination drenches are generally the most effective in young calves.
5. Ensure you know how to drench effectively and when you should be drenching to avoid resistance.
6. Minimise worm burdens by feeding well, grazing good covers and graze clean pasture.



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On-Farm Research Calf Rearing Fact Sheet 2.8

Introduction

Gastro-intestinal parasites (worms) are common in cattle and those commonly seen in cattle include *Ostertagia*, *Trichostrongylus* and *Cooperia*. Females lay thousands of eggs which are excreted in the faeces. When environmental conditions are favourable the eggs hatch into the L3 stage. L3 larvae are ingested along with the pasture, swallowed and then develop to adult worms which attach themselves to the wall of the intestine. Damage to the intestinal wall can be measured in the blood by the amount of pepsinogen present. Adult worms start the cycle again by laying eggs which are excreted in faeces. Optimum conditions for hatching are moist grass with temperatures above 10 °C. The highest contamination levels on pasture generally occur between October and May. Once calves start eating pasture they can ingest larvae but intestinal parasite worm burdens tend to remain low until after weaning. Younger animals are more susceptible to worm burdens than older animals. The more larvae present on the pasture the more likely you will have problems. Ideally calves should be grazed on pasture that is fresh and has not been recently grazed by calves. Even low levels of infection can reduce growth rates in calves.

Symptoms

- Low appetite, weight loss or reduced weight gain,
- Watery diarrhoea,
- Dehydration,
- Poor dull coat,
- Low energy,
- Faecal egg counts (FEC) above 1000 epg (eggs per gram of faeces) indicate significant adult worms,
- In calves, plasma pepsinogen concentrations above 1 IU/ml indicate infestation.

Treatment

- Reduce exposure to parasite burdens by moving calves onto paddocks that have not been grazed for a long period. Avoid too much grazing pressure – higher pasture covers reduce the number of larvae consumed as most larvae live close to the ground. Calves which are healthy and well fed will be less susceptible to gastro-intestinal parasites than weaker calves. Grazing paddocks with adult cattle or sheep after calves will reduce the larvae load on the pastures.
- Calves need to be drenched before worm burdens get too high. Can be administered as a pour on, oral or injection. Oral combination drenches tend to be the most effective drench in young calves.
- Talk to your vet re avoiding drench resistance - factors include using the correct dose, returning treated stock to contaminated pastures, not treating healthier animals, only drenching when necessary based on faecal egg counts (FEC) and symptoms.
- Make sure that the volume of drench administered is based on the size of the largest calves being treated as under-drenching increases the potential for drench resistance. Provided resistance is not present, drenching should result in a rapid cessation of the diarrhoea.