

Grass Tetany in cattle and sheep

Grass tetany (hypomagnesaemia/grass staggers) is an acute and true veterinary emergency which we are starting to see the past few weeks mostly in lactating sheep and cattle at grass. It is caused by a deficiency in blood magnesium levels.

Any reduced intake in grass in times of bad weather, bulling activity, transport, dietary changes or other concurrent disease can predispose to grass tetany as cattle and sheep need a constant daily intake especially during high milk production. Lush fast growing grass as well as grass heavily fertilised with potassium or nitrogen also lead to low magnesium blood levels.

Signs commonly seen are staggering, high head carriage, muscle tremors which progresses to seizures with characteristic paddling. Immediate treatment is needed with Magniject No 9 injected under the skin.

Prevention is key so call us to discuss possible options such as mineral licks, rations containing magnesium, magnesium boluses and adding magnesium to water.

Nematodirus in Lambs

Nematodirus is a nematode worm that typically affects lambs early in the season, between April-June. The main risk factor for Nematodirus is grazing young lambs on the same pasture for consecutive years, as the eggs can survive on the fields through the winter and then hatch once there is adequate moisture and the temperature is consistently over 10C.

The important difference between Nematodirus and other sheep worms is that Nematodirus causes disease before any eggs are detectable in faeces - so you can't rely on egg counts to warn you of a problem. Instead, if you are grazing lambs on the same fields as last year and/or you know you've had Nematodirus in the past, keep a close eye on the SCOPS Nematodirus forecast at <https://www.scops.org.uk/forecasts/nematodirusforecast/> to see what the risk is in your area.

You can reduce or eliminate your Nematodirus risk by rotating which fields are grazed by young lambs in the Spring. However, where this is not possible it may be necessary to treat lambs - the recommended treatment for Nematodirus is a white drench. As always, it is important to minimise the development of resistance to wormers by avoiding underdosing - weigh a few lambs and ensure you are dosing for the weight of the heaviest individuals in the group, and calibrate your dosing equipment regularly.

Parasite control in grazing cattle

There are 3 main groups of parasites to be aware of in grazing cattle:

- Gut worms - eggs overwinter on pasture and hatch when temperatures increase in the Spring. Normally, the burden will gradually increase as the season goes on, but warm and wet spells can cause mass hatching events that trigger sudden disease outbreaks, so be particularly vigilant following these periods. Signs to look for are scouring, weight loss or poor growth rates, dullness and poor coat quality. Faecal egg counts can be used for diagnosis and also to check that treatments have been successful.
- Lungworm - this also survives overwinter on pasture, and cattle that have not previously been exposed to it are susceptible. If you notice coughing in a group of grazing cattle, lungworm is one possible cause. If it is a recurrent problem, it may be worth considering vaccinating stock before turnout in the Spring.
- Fluke - fluke can cause a range of signs from milk weight loss to sudden death. Late summer and Autumn are high risk times for severe/sudden fluke cases (acute fluke), but chronic (less severe/longer duration) illness can be seen throughout the winter and Spring too. Fluke rely on a certain species of wetland snail to reproduce, so restricting access to wet/boggy areas is important for control.

Managing worms and fluke in cattle at grass requires constant awareness. Key factors determining the risks for each group include:

- Age of cattle - for gut worms, younger animals are typically at higher risk than older ones, as immunity gradually builds up. However, older cattle that have had limited exposure to gut worms can still be susceptible. For liver fluke, no immunity builds up so cattle of any age can be affected.
- Farm history of parasite burden - you will probably be aware from previous years which parasites are present on the farm. If unsure, it may be worth doing some strategic testing. Other useful information can be gained from abattoir feedback. In herds that buy in cattle there is always a risk of introducing new diseases - ensure you have a good quarantine procedure in place. For parasites, this usually involves treating cattle as they move onto the farm and then housing them for 24-48h after treatment to limit shedding onto pasture.
- Grazing history - keeping records of which fields have been grazed by which age group can help you to plan a rotation that minimises spread between year groups. Where possible use mowing, crop rotation or other livestock to clean up pasture for younger cattle.

Actions to take now:

- Consider worming calves to limit the build up of eggs on pasture - if in doubt, have a chat with us and bring in a faecal sample to test.
- Try to graze hay/silage aftermaths with calves as these are the animals that will benefit the most from the clean grazing
- Listen out for coughing that could indicate lungworm

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