

# VETERINARY CALL

by Bob Larson, Kansas State University

## Preventing Coccidiosis

*Learn how to identify symptoms and help prevent coccidiosis.*

Coccidiosis is caused by a parasite that damages cells of the intestinal tract. Diarrhea or bloody diarrhea can result. Almost all cattle are infected with at least a few coccidia organisms, but problems only occur if the parasite can multiply rapidly.

Recently weaned cattle, particularly those exposed to bad weather or mud and shipped to a new location, are considered to be at high risk for coccidiosis. Young suckling calves can be affected, particularly in situations when mud is a problem or other causes of diarrhea are present.

Adult cattle that remain in the herd are usually immune to the local coccidia. However, bringing in new cattle can cause an outbreak of coccidiosis in the new animals when they are exposed to the local coccidia — or the new animals may bring in a new species of coccidia and cause an outbreak in the original herd.

Cattle with coccidiosis may have straining and watery diarrhea with blood, a rough hair coat, and/or poor weight gain. In addition, some affected cattle in a group can show signs of nervous system problems such as tremors, eye twitching and convulsions. Many cattle with coccidiosis appear healthy, but they will have decreased weight gain and feed efficiency.

Mild cases involve only a few

days of watery feces without noticeable blood, and the cattle do not become depressed or go off feed. If the infection is severe, death is fairly common. Coccidiosis can also increase the risk for other severe diseases such as pneumonia.

Your veterinarian is most likely to diagnose coccidiosis after examining cattle with bloody diarrhea and ruling out other problems. The organism can often be detected in high numbers in fecal samples. Although, this test is not always accurate because intestinal damage can occur before large numbers of coccidia are found in the feces.

A number of treatments are available, and severely affected cattle should be separated from the group so they can be kept warm, dry and comfortable while being individually treated with fluids to correct dehydration and drugs that will kill the organism. Whenever one or more cattle in a group have obvious signs of coccidiosis, you can assume the rest of the group has been exposed and is likely to be suffering less obvious losses.

To help prevent coccidiosis, good animal husbandry practices to improve sanitation and reduce stress are important.

The organisms survive very well in the environment, and it is probably

impossible to completely remove them from areas where cattle live.

Young animals should be kept in as mud-free of an environment as the weather will allow, and feed and water should be kept off the ground as much as possible to help minimize fecal contamination.

To reduce stress, castration and dehorning should be done at a young age several weeks ahead of weaning. Low-stress weaning strategies should be implemented wherever possible.

In addition to management strategies, a number of drugs such as ionophores, decoquinatone or amprolium can be delivered by feed or water to groups of cattle at risk for coccidiosis to minimize the risk of severe disease. A month or more of daily intake of these preventative treatments is necessary to break the life cycle of the organism. **AJ**

*Editor's note: Robert L. Larson is a professor of production medicine and executive director of Veterinary Medicine Continuing Education at Kansas State University.*