

VETERINARY CALL

by Bob Larson, Kansas State University

Cattle Lameness Due to Foot Problems

Learn the first steps of action and how to treat various problems potentially responsible for lameness in the herd.

Lameness in cows, bulls and replacement heifers is a common problem confronting cattlemen.

One of the most common causes of lameness is an infection of the skin and soft tissue above the hoof known as foot rot. The bacteria responsible are present in soil, but in order for the bacteria to invade the foot, a break in the skin must occur first.

Injuries allowing infection may be due to rocks, rough ground, crop residue stubble or extreme dryness. Wet and muddy areas can also be a problem in that prolonged exposure to wet ground can cause the skin to become soft and more easily injured.

Lame cattle should be confined in a squeeze chute, where the foot can be lifted and carefully examined to make an accurate diagnosis. If treated early, most cattle with foot rot will respond to antibiotic treatment with complete recovery.

If the infection has had longer to invade nearby joints, recovery is less likely. Prevention of outbreaks of foot rot is primarily directed toward maintaining clean pens and designing watering and feeding areas to prevent buildup of mud.

Hairy heel warts

Maintaining clean pens is also

important to prevent a disease called hairy heel warts, or digital dermatitis. Most commonly, a painful raw area that can look like a wart and may have long hair-like growths is identified directly behind the heels, but the area between the toes can also be affected.

Common in dairy cattle, it can also occur in beef cattle housed in a dry lot. The current theory is the germs causing the disease thrive in manure-contaminated water and mud.

Injury and infection

Lameness can be caused by puncture wounds from nails, glass or sharp pieces of metal that lead to infection. Lameness in cattle can also be caused by infections in and around joints by bacteria, such as *Mycoplasma bovis*, that can travel through the bloodstream to infect joints and tendons.

Toe abscesses can occur when excitable cattle scramble on abrasive concrete in the treatment or processing areas. Toe abscesses are treated by nipping off the tip of the toe to allow drainage and administration of antibiotics. Cattle then need to be placed in areas with clean, solid footing.

Sole abscesses on the bottom of

the foot are more difficult to treat than toe abscesses. The sole must be trimmed, and the abscess opened to allow drainage. A wooden block is glued to the opposite toe to keep the affected toe from bearing weight. Both sole abscesses and laminitis are associated with acidosis in cattle on high-concentrate diets or on stalk fields with a lot of residual grain.

Summary

Cattle lameness is often caused by painful diseases of the foot. If the lameness is due to foot rot, it can be treated early and appropriately, and the outcome is usually very good. Problems such as puncture wounds, digital dermatitis, and toe or sole abscesses are more difficult to manage, but many affected cattle can be successfully treated.

Whenever cattle become lame, it is almost always a good idea to confine the affected animal in a squeeze chute or tilt-table to allow a thorough examination, so an accurate diagnosis can be made and appropriate treatment initiated. **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 in Manhattan, Kan.