Vet Call

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Skin diseases of cattle

Skin diseases of cattle are fairly common and, while seldom life-threatening, can affect an animal's ability to function at peak efficiency. They can also be an indication of more serious problems.

Scratching the itch

The most common signs of skin disease are itchiness (scratching), hair loss and visible lesions. An animal that is excessively scratching is trying to relieve itchy skin — and normal, healthy skin is not itchy. The known causes of itchy skin include external parasites, allergies, bacterial infections of the skin, fungal infections and irritants that come in contact with skin.

External parasites that can cause skin disease include lice, mange mites, flies and ticks. Lice and mange mites are usually considered cool-weather problems, while flies and ticks are warm-weather problems. Both lice and mites reproduce more rapidly in winter than in warm weather, and they can be passed from one animal to another more easily when animals group tightly together to combat cold temperatures. Hair loss often accompanies either lice or mite infestations due to the physical breaking of hairs during scratching.

Horn flies are considered the primary fly problem of grazing cattle, while stable flies are a problem for confined cattle. Horse flies, deer flies, houseflies and other flies can also be a problem for beef cattle. The feeding activities of flies are annoying and may cause localized skin damage as well as a reduction in forage/feed consumption.

Identification of cattle with mange mites must be reported to state and federal veterinary officials through your veterinarian. External parasite control involves good sanitation of livestock areas and proper use of antiparasitic medications and chemicals.

Skin disease can indicate areas where animal housing, sanitation, forage management and overall health should be addressed.

Allergic reactions, infections

Cattle can have allergic reactions that include skin lesions. In some allergic reactions that occur rapidly, the skin becomes extremely itchy, and the affected animal appears intent on gaining relief by scratching or attempting to escape. Other allergic reactions involve skin lesions that appear slowly throughout time and include reactions to some drugs, grubs (fly larvae) encysted in the skin, and the bites of some types of flies. Removal of the original cause of the allergic reaction will allow the skin lesions to heal.

Bacterial infections of the skin are most common when rainfall is abundant and sunlight is minimal. These infections often occur after the skin is damaged, and bacteria are able to establish themselves in a wound.

In the U.S., the primary skin problem caused by a virus is warts. Warts are most commonly seen in animals less than 2 years of age. Older cattle are able to build immunity against the virus. The virus can be passed between animals, and it takes about one to six months after exposure to the virus for warts to appear.

Warts are seldom a health problem, and most affected animals will recover spontaneously whether the warts are treated or not. To improve cattle's appearance, warts can be cut off.

Animals with an immune system that does not adequately respond to the wart-causing virus can have very severe wart infestations that impair health and decrease performance.

Other causes

Ringworm is caused by fungus (not worms) and results in areas of hairless, thickened skin without itchiness. The fungus can be passed between animals when they are in close contact.

Ringworm will usually clear up by itself, but to speed healing, veterinarians sometimes recommend applying a 2% solution of iodine or other antifungal medication to the affected areas. Sunlight is very effective at killing ringworm fungus, so most cases occur in the winter and clear themselves as daylight hours increase in the spring and summer.

Frostbite can cause severe damage to skin and underlying tissues in young calves and animals too sick to protect themselves. Frostbite lesions occur on the extremities (the ears, feet or udder) when the weather is wet and cold. Treatment includes warming the affected area and good husbandry to keep the animal comfortable.

A pair of similar and severe diseases that include skin lesions are ergotism and fescue toxicosis. Erogotism can occur among animals grazing many plant species, while fescue toxicosis occurs in animals grazing fescue grass. In both cases, fungal parasites of grass produce alkaloids (chemicals) that cause constriction of blood vessels, including blood vessels to the extremities.

The skin can slough, and the underlying tissues can be damaged to the point that they cannot be repaired. Ears, tails and feet are commonly affected by ergotism and fescue toxicosis. In severe cases, treatment is not helpful. In less severe cases, animals should be moved off the offending pasture and provided an appropriate diet and animal husbandry to allow recovery.

Conclusion

Common skin diseases in cattle are usually mild and do not greatly affect animal health or performance, but skin disease can indicate areas where animal housing, sanitation, forage management and overall health should be addressed.

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