



Vet Call

► by **Bob Larson**, Kansas State University

Herd health

Maintaining healthy cows, calves and bulls is vitally important for the short-term and long-term sustainability of a beef herd. Cows and bulls face different health risks than calves or growing cattle, and herds in different parts of the country may face dissimilar risks. Working closely with your veterinarian who is familiar with the geographic area and goals of your operation is essential for creating a herd health strategy that fits your specific needs.

Practical tips

Good health for all ages of cattle starts with meeting their nutritional needs. When forage is green and growing, cattle need little additional supplementation (with the exception of salt and possibly other minerals). However, when forage is dormant, cattle may need supplementary feeds that provide additional energy or protein in order to maintain their health and productivity. Growing cattle and cows that are nursing calves require a diet that is higher in nutrients than dry cows and mature bulls.

Specific health problems that cattle may encounter when grazing or eating hay include grass tetany, nitrate toxicity, prussic acid poisoning and choke. These encounters with toxic plants should be addressed by your veterinarian based on your pastures and forage.

Once the nutritional needs of all the animals in the herd are assured, another important health concern is the prevention of severe parasite infestations. External parasites such as flies, ticks, lice and other insects can directly cause illness and discomfort for any age of cattle, and they can cause additional harm because of diseases that they can carry.

Calves and growing cattle are generally at greater risk of having severe problems due to internal parasites, commonly called worms, but in some geographic areas and grazing situations, even adults can have health problems. Chemical insecticides and deworming products are used in combination with grazing strategies that decrease cattle exposure to new generations of parasites hatching from eggs present in manure, decaying plants or other sources in the environment.

The greatest risk of death or severe disease occurs at the time of birth, and disease risk stays high for the first few weeks of life. A difficult birth can cause a calf to die even

PHOTO BY HANNAH UDEN, NJAA/ANGUS JOURNAL PHOTOGRAPHY CONTEST



before it is born or shortly after birth due to injuries sustained, or because it is not able to survive a cold or otherwise stressful birth environment. Considering the genetic influences of calving ease when selecting heifers and the bulls they are bred to for their first mating is important to minimize the risk of calving difficulty. Developing heifers with a diet that allows them to achieve a size and weight that is compatible with delivering a healthy calf is also important.

Consuming colostrum, or first milk, shortly after being born is very important for calf health. A calf that is born with minimal difficulty is likely to be able to stand and suckle from its dam shortly after birth, but any level of calving difficulty can lead to delayed standing by either the calf or dam, which leads to delayed intake of colostrum.

Calves, because they are young and do not have a mature immune system, are susceptible to many diseases that rarely, if ever, cause problems for adults. Germs that cause scours are passed to young calves from the manure of other calves and adults. Mud and manure are excellent environments for scours-causing germs, and strategies to keep young calves in as clean an environment as possible during the first 1 to 2 months of age are an essential part of a herd health strategy.

Growing cattle, particularly if they are

stressed by trucking and commingling with cattle from other herds around the time of weaning, are at high risk for developing respiratory disease, or pneumonia. Vaccinating cattle before they are likely to develop respiratory disease and good animal husbandry, including minimizing the stress of trucking and commingling, are used to protect the health of calves during the weeks

to months around weaning when they are at highest risk for pneumonia.

Adult cattle are able to maintain good health in most situations, but extreme malnutrition, lack of sanitation or high disease exposure can result in illness or death. Pregnant cows are also at risk of aborting when exposed to some disease agents. Herd health strategies to protect adult cattle include annual vaccinations, careful

introduction of replacement females and bulls, and isolation from other cattle as much as practical.

Bulls and cows face many of the same risks due to disease or injury; however, because of the high number of miles traveled during the breeding season, the act of mounting, and the likelihood of fighting, injuries of the feet, legs, penis, testicles and other body parts are a special challenge for bulls. Assuring that facilities are well-designed and maintained; routinely observing feet and legs and taking corrective action when problems are identified; and monitoring and removing aggressive cattle, dogs or people who can increase the likelihood of injury are all strategies to improve herd health.

Good reproductive and growth efficiency are not possible if cattle health is compromised. Working closely with your veterinarian to address the greatest risks faced by your herd is the key to a successful herd health strategy.

EMAIL: rlarson@vet.k-state.edu

Editor's Note: Bob Larson is professor of production medicine at Kansas State University.

