



# Hardware Disease

Prevention beats a cure.

Story & photos by **Becky Mills**

**T**raumatic reticuloperitonitis is a fancy name for a disease with a simple cause — cows aren't a bit particular about what they put in their mouths. You've seen 'em. They'll lick almost anything, and before you know it, that rusty nail out of the abandoned catch pen is heading toward their belly. Or, when grass is short and they're grazing hard to get every morsel, they accidentally pick up and swallow a piece of wire from the last fence repair job.

From there it is down hill. The nail or wire hits the reticulum, or fore stomach, and starts rumbling around when the reticulum does the churning bit it is designed to do. Or, the cow goes into labor.

"I see hardware disease in cows anywhere from several weeks to months after calving," says Paul Walz, Auburn University veterinarian. "When she goes into labor, the foreign bodies are pushed through the stomach."

Either way, that sharp metal is sticking through the reticulum wall. That's where the trouble really starts. With luck, the infection will wall off. Otherwise, the bacteria in the reticulum leaks into the sterile abdominal cavity and peritonitis sets in. Plus, there are plenty of other important organs in the neighborhood for that offending nail to pierce, like the heart sac. Then the cow is in a world of hurt.



Symptoms can vary depending on exactly where the nail ends up. "What we generally see is the cow's front elbows go out," says University of Georgia veterinarian Doug Ensley. "She is trying to keep the pressure from her chest and abdomen."

"She may be reluctant to move," Walz adds. "She may have a hunched back and look like she's lame."

More than likely, she'll also gradually lose weight.

In severe cases, where the nail or wire pierces her heart sac, she'll show symptoms of heart failure.

Fixes for the condition can range from low-tech to major surgery. "You can put a rumen magnet in them. It looks like a big pill," Ensley says. "It may stabilize the metal."

"We use antibiotics," Walz says. "We may do surgery, go into the rumen and try to remove the foreign body and drain the abscess."

## Avoiding hardware

Prevention is definitely the preferred way to go. "Make sure building sites are cleaned up and there is no wire laying around when you're fixing fences," Ensley says. "Probably one of the easiest things to do is put a magnet on your mixer wagon. Then if there is any metal in the feed or hay, it will catch it. You can also put magnets in your cows on a therapeutic basis," he adds.

► **Above:** When grass is short and cows are grazing hard to get every morsel, they may accidentally pick up and swallow a piece of wire from the last fence repair job.



► **When it comes to hardware disease, prevention is definitely the preferred way to go. "Make sure building sites are cleaned up and there is no wire laying around when you're fixing fences," says Doug Ensley.**

After he suspected three of his cows and two of his calves had hardware disease, Westminster, S.C., cattleman Joe Davis doesn't take chances. "If we're working on a corral and a nail flies out of my hand, I find the nail. After I work on a fence, I pick up all the pieces of wire. After the road crew mows the sides of the road, we walk the fenceline and pick up any cans that fly over the fence."

He adds, "I keep a bucket in my truck just for any kind of nails or wire I pick up in the pastures. We're fanatics about it."

