

Ask A Vet: Seasonal Diarrhea Problems in Cattle

Sunday, December 25, 2016

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

I have been seeing diarrhea in my cattle but have no other signs. Sometimes I will see blood in it as well. They are still eating and drinking. Should I be concerned?

-Perplexed

Dear Perplexed,

This potentially is a disease known as "winter dysentery" which is characterized in adult cattle by a profuse watery diarrhea with or without blood. We generally see this in the northern states between November and March and is believed to be caused by a virus. It may be rare to see successive back to back outbreaks, however, it can occur from 3-15 years in between. We may see animals perfectly normal one day and then have explosive stools in 24 hours. Usually the stools are dark green, brown but can be black with blood. They actually may not appear sick at all and won't necessarily have a fever unless just prior to the outbreak. There may be a drop off in milk production in dairy herds and possibly won't return to normal till the next lactation depending on stage of lactation when affected. It would be very rare to not have animals return to normalcy after 3 days with supportive care. For the most part it will be a short run course over 2 weeks.

It is believed to be caused by a corona virus. It has been reported that the strains seen in calves is the same seen in adults. At one time they thought it was caused by a *Campylobacter* species of bacteria but generally not associated with dysentery. Other diseases one must consider causing diarrhea are BVD (bovine viral diarrhea), coccidiosis, and salmonellosis. It is real important to contact your veterinarian to identify the cause and get an accurate diagnosis since different treatments are used for these different diseases. Some diseases like BVD can be diagnosed with blood samples using viral isolation or a specialized test on stools using ELISA testing. Coccidiosis can be identified with fecal flotation looking for cysts under the microscope and Salmonella is diagnosed through fecal cultures. Keep in mind that something like Salmonella can be transmitted to people so accurate diagnosis and proper handling of samples is very important.

The most important thing is to provide good supportive care to eliminate dehydration. There are recommendations to provide vaccines in calves and using coronavirus vaccines in adult cows prior to calving to provide colostrum immunity to the newborn calf. Be aware you may not want to use same equipment to handle manure as feed to help eliminate spread. The main thing is to use good hygiene and care when handling manure.

As always contact your veterinarian to help decide the best protocol management and treating any diseases.

-Dr. Wanda Schmeltz