Coccidiosis of calves

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Coccidiosis is one of the commonest causes of calf loss and debility on South-West dairy farms. Treatment and control are simple once the nature of the disease is understood.

COCCIDIOSIS or “blood scours” as it is usually known, is a common disease of calves in the south-west of Western Australia.

The disease is caused by small parasites called coccidia which invade the cells lining the intestines and multiply, causing enteritis and characteristic blood-stained scours.

Once cattle recover from coccidiosis they become immune to further attacks but they may still carry coccidia and pass on the infection to susceptible animals. Calf-rearing methods used on South-West dairy farms often allow calves to come into contact with infected older cattle and outbreaks of coccidiosis occur quite frequently in large groups of calves.

The severity of symptoms of coccidiosis is influenced by the species of coccidia causing the disease, how many organisms the calf has swallowed, and how much immunity the calf has.

A group of calves suffering from the disease may show a range of symptoms such as rough coats, weakness, listlessness, diarrhoea and loss of weight or poor weight gains. Weak calves may defaecate without standing up, soiling their tails and hind-quarters. Others may stand and make intense straining efforts without passing any faeces.

The faeces may be watery or only slightly liquid but are always quite different from the “white scour” seen in younger calves. Diarrhoea caused by coccidiosis may also contain strands of mucus and streaks or specks of blood. Infection with some species of coccidia produces a very bloody scour and in these cases the faeces may even contain strands of intestinal lining.

Animals showing severe symptoms may die rapidly and in very bad cases death may occur before diarrhoea has developed. Calves less severely affected will show persistent diarrhoea and loss of condition followed by slow recovery. Others may just show a loss of condition and poor growth rates.

Treatment and Control

Treatment is effective if carried out in the early stages of the disease. However, calves which have shown severe symptoms may not recover because of the extensive intestinal damage they have suffered.

If the disease has been diagnosed in a group of calves, all the calves in the group should be treated and moved to a spelled paddock. Sulphadimidine or the nitrofurazones, given orally, are effective if used at dose rates recommended by the manufacturers.

The disease is best controlled by the adoption of husbandry practices which will reduce the number of coccidia ingested by the calves during the time they are susceptible to the disease.
The following measures are recommended to help reduce the incidence of coccidiosis in calves—

- Paddocks in which calves are run should be as dry as possible and free from low-lying, permanently muddy areas. The effluent from the dairy must not drain into the area where the calves are run. The paddocks should have been free of older cattle for as long as possible before the first group of calves is introduced.
- It is best to have several paddocks so that the calves can be rotated between them.
- Large groups of calves should be segregated into age groups so that the younger calves do not come into contact with older animals which may be passing coccidia without showing symptoms.
- All feed and water troughs should be high enough to avoid faecal contamination.

These measures will reduce the level of pasture contamination and give the calf an opportunity to build up the required level of resistance.
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