K-STATE Research and Extension | Wildcat District

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Coccidiosis in Cattle

Coccidiosis is an intestinal disease affecting several animal species. In cattle, coccidiosis is evident in stock a month to a year of age, but all age groups can be infected. The culprit is a rapidly multiplying protozoan called coccidia.

There are many species of coccidia, but the two most common that affect cattle are Eimeria bovis and Eimeria zuernii. Coccidia are very host specific, only cattle specific species will cause disease in cattle. The coccidia protozoan invades the cells of the intestinal lining, quickly reproducing and causing the infected cells to rupture. The cells from the last stage of this reproduction are called Oocytes. These guys are quite thrifty in the environment, contaminating feed and water, just waiting to be ingested by their next victim.

Most coccidia-infected cattle don't show symptoms, even though they are shedding the infectious agent. Coccidiosis is frequently referred to as an opportunist — a disease that develops when other stress factors are present. Clinical signs develop in the face of stress such as weather changes, weaning, overcrowding, long truck rides, or unsanitary conditions. Shipping fever leads to the highest incidence of coccidiosis occurring in the first 21 days after arrival at the feedlot.

Symptoms of coccidiosis depend on the state of the disease at the time of observation. In general, coccidiosis affects the intestinal tract, so in mild cases, only watery diarrhea, and little blood is present, if at all. Severely affected animals may have thin, watery manure along with intestinal mucosa and blood. Straining to defecate, rapid dehydration, weight loss, and lack of appetite may be evident. Rough hair coat, decreased weight gains, and manure packed hair around the perineal regions is often noted in infected animals.

Diagnosis often is obvious, but occasional confusion can exist — seemingly normal animals can have oocyst-infested manure. And, an animal may have diarrhea before oocysts can be found, making lab diagnosis difficult.

Animal susceptibility is variable; ingestion of oocysts may not produce the disease and some animals constantly carry them without being affected. Recovered animals develop immunity and can be partially resistant to reinfection.

Treatment of infected animals is required. Individual treatment should be used when possible; but water or feed medications are available for herd applications. The actual coccidiosis is critical to be treated and the subsequent symptoms of dehydration and loss of appetite must be addressed. Work with a veterinarian to select the most appropriate treatment option.

In the event of an outbreak, separate sick animals from healthy stock as soon as possible and provide proper treatment. To prevent a coccidiosis outbreak, reduce stress, such as overcrowding, and keep pens scraped clean and as free of mud as possible. Offer feed in bunks to prevent animals from picking up oocysts off the ground. Clean water tanks regularly and daily during an outbreak.

For more information about diseases and management, contact Wendie Powell, Livestock Production Agent, (620) 784-5337, wendiepowell@ksu.edu.

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