

PROBLEMS WITH CALVING AND LAMBING

Are you seeing down cows/ewes around calving/lambing time? In some cases, it might just be an individual animal problem but it could also be a herd problem due to dietary issues. Common causes of downer cows/ewes include hypomagnesaemia (grass tetany), hypocalcaemia (milk fever), pregnancy toxaemia and obstetric paralysis.

Hypomagnesaemia (grass tetany)

Hypomagnesaemia usually occurs in animals grazed primarily on fresh, lush, rapidly growing pastures, which have low magnesium (Mg) content and have been heavily fertilised with nitrogen and/or potassium. Due to the increased demand of Mg for milk production and fetal growth, pregnant animals become prone to getting this disorder around calving time. Dietary management of pregnant cows and ewes around parturition is critical to the prevention of grass tetany.

Affected animals can become aggressive and hyperaesthetic (i.e. show extreme response) to noise or other external stimuli, such as charging, bellowing and galloping. Signs will progress to incoordination, spastic/abnormal gait and, finally tetany and recumbency. Other clinical signs may include weight loss, reduced milk yield, udder oedema and rough coat.

Hypocalcaemia (milk fever)

Hypocalcaemia is one of the most common metabolic diseases of dairy and beef cattle. The majority of calcium (Ca) is stored in the animal's bone and there is a limited amount of readily-available calcium in the blood. The sudden demand for Ca with the onset of lactation can easily exceed the ability of the body to access Ca from diet and bone. This causes the blood Ca concentration to fall below the level required to maintain normal body functions (predominantly nerves and muscles). The risk of hypocalcaemia increases with age, high phosphorous and fat diet, and low Mg diet (lush green feed). Affected animals are also associated with a higher risk of dystocia (birth problems), retained foetal membranes, displaced abomasum, ketosis and mastitis.

Clinical signs mostly occurs within 48 hours of parturition, but cases can occur several days before and up to 10 days after parturition. Affected animals generally progress from ataxia (wobbly gait) and inappetence to sternal recumbency (lying on their chest), then finally become laterally recumbent (lying on their side) and ultimately dead.

Pregnancy toxaemia

Pregnancy toxaemia is common in over-fat pregnant beef cows/ewes that are under fed during the last 2 months of pregnancy. Cows and ewes, especially heifers and maiden ewes, with twins or one massive calf/lamb are the most susceptible because of the extremely high energy demand not only from the foetus, but also from the ongoing growth of the cow/ewe itself.

Clinical signs include dullness, depression, anorexia and rapid weight loss. Untreated animals can become recumbent and eventually dead within 3 to 10 days.

Obstetric paralysis

Obstetric paralysis occurs in animals that have recently given birth. The increased intra-pelvic pressure during calving/lambing, especially with dystocia due to foeto-maternal misproportion, damages the nerves that run through the pelvis causing paralysis of the hindlimbs.

Affected animals may be recumbent (lying down) or can be found standing with a wide-based stance and/or the fetlock knuckled over and the hock dropped.

How to prevent downer cows/ewes from happening?

Proper nutrition is the key to preventing animals from getting metabolic diseases around parturition time. Maintain your pregnant animals in a BCS of 3! Do not overfeed or withhold feed to pregnant animals during the last 3 months of gestation – this is the time when the cows/ewes are at the highest risk of negative energy balance due to the huge energy demand for growth of the foetus. Animals should be given good quality hay and pasture – legumes are a good choice of protein, energy and trace elements (vitamins and minerals). However, heavily fertilised lush pastures should be avoided so as to reduce the risk of hypomagnesaemia and hypocalcaemia.

If you have any questions or concerns, please call Cowra Veterinary Centre and our friendly staff will be happy to provide you with help and advice regarding the health and welfare of your animals.