It is not unusual for infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR) to lie dormant as a latent background disease and go unnoticed, but when a proportion of Robert Graham's herd started showing clinical signs following housing, the vet was immediately consulted. **Simon Wragg** reports.

Early detection helps control IBR infection on North Yorkshire farm

A keen stockman's eye alerted Robert Graham his 180-cow dairy herd was fighting a flare up of Infectious Bovine Rhinotracheitis (IBR) last autumn.

"We'd recently housed the cows and the weather had dropped cold," says Mr Graham, who farms near Ripon in North Yorkshire. "It sounds simplistic but they just looked ill – runny noses and eyes, just looking sorry for themselves and running temperatures."

About 20 per cent of the herd's high yielders were showing clinical signs initially prompting a call to the farm's veterinary practice Bishopton Vets.

"I was pretty sure it was IBR as we'd been monitoring the herd for a number of years right back to when free bulk milk sampling was offered to identify disease present in cows. At that time – and we're going back 10 or 12 years – IBR was found as a low-lying disease in the background.

"We discussed with our vet at the time whether to vaccinate or not. My view was we'd had no clinical signs and blood tests also proved inconclusive for IBR so we just rumbled along. We've monitored heifers in recent years but again we've not had IBR flare up."

As a latent background disease which remains dormant IBR may go unnoticed, explains Jonathan Statham of Bishopton Vet's Ripon practice. "It can be a life-long latent infection which can flare up when the infected animal is under stress. And stress can come in many guises whether it be calving, mixing stock, transporting animals, poor nutrition or even another disease outbreak such as Bovine Viral Diarrhoea.

"Typically, these latent carriers will shed the virus when stressed although they might not show any signs of the disease themselves. The virus can be passed directly through contact between animals or via airborne transmission within buildings or across farm boundaries such as fences and hedges.

Economics

"Naive animals, which have not been exposed to IBR, become infected and begin shedding the virus which in turn infects other herd members. While the main economic factors are loss of milk yield and suppressed growth rate, there is often tell-tale signs to be aware of such as those seen in Robert Graham's herd.

"Look out for a clear discharge from the eyes and noses which may become less clear in a matter of days, laboured breathing, raised temperatures, and a loss of appetite," he advises.

Mr Graham says he was confident in his own mind the problem was IBR, but contacted the vets, who confirmed his suspicions.

"This was backed up with follow-up herd testing using paired blood samples. We've vaccinated for IBR from then onwards."

Although bulk milk sample testing had highlighted IBR presence over a number of years, a good starting point for all farms is to get to know the health status of the herd. This can be done by taking blood samples for analysis, suggest vets.

"This can provide valuable information to the farmer and the vet," says Mr Statham. "In the case of IBR other background disease such as s can trigger an outbreak. It is therefore also important to establish the health status of cattle bought into the herd – such as replacement heifers – or those returning from grazing which may have come into contact with other cattle," he advises.

"It is estimated 70 per cent of UK dairy herds and 40 per cent of beef herds test positive to IBR so the disease is widespread."

Practical measures on-farm will help limit the risk of an IBR outbreak, he adds. Good animal husbandry and nutrition are key. Minimising stress factors such as mixing of cattle or changes in diet or environment will help.

Vaccination

Vaccination has its role. "The appropriate use of appropriate use of vaccine both proactively in naïve or uninfected heifers and to reduce shedding of the IBR virus from endemically infected older cattle within a herd environment should be considered."

For Mr Graham, the administering of Bovilis IBR Marker Live intranasal resulted in a turnaround of symptoms among herd members within a matter of days.

Studies suggest an IBR outbreak can result in 173 litres per cow in lost milk production, with beef cattle taking up to an extra four weeks to reach targeted finishing weight. The impact of potential losses often outweigh the cost of vaccination.

For peace of mind the herd is vaccinated every six months to build up the herd's immunity.

Robert Graham called the vet when about 20 per cent of the herd started showing clinical signs of IBR.

"Other background disease such as BVD can trigger an outbreak"
JONATHAN STATHAM

Signs to look out for

- Runny nose
- Runny eyes
- Pneumonia
- Coughing
- Raised temperature
- Loss of appetite
- Milk drop
- Weight loss
- Post calving problem
- Dull and off-colour

What can you do to reduce risk of IBR

- Know health status of herd including replacements
- Bulk milk sampling or blood testing available
- Reduce stressors such as mixing stock
- Defend farm boundaries – it can spread by aerosol up to 5m across fences/hedges
- Check all bought-in stock
- Consider vaccination and regular booster
- Be observant
- Ask farm vet for advice

IBR has been monitored within Robert Graham's herd for a number of years but the dormant disease may go unnoticed and only flare up when the infected animal is under stress.