

# Extra care needed with winter cattle

**W**HEN housed, cattle are bundled together in a confined space and more likely to pass around bugs or infections. By keeping an eye out for common housing-related conditions, we can help nip things in the bud before a problem develops.

## I fatten cattle and have a recurring problem with lameness – why?

In winter, we regularly see cases of digital dermatitis (DD) in fattening cattle.

DD is a condition of the skin of the foot. It is most commonly seen on the heel where the haired skin joins the hoof. It appears as a painful infected looking sore on the heel. The skin will often look eroded or eaten away.

DD is an infectious disease caused by bacteria. Unfortunately, once it is in housed cattle, it can be very difficult to eradicate. There is no vaccine available and control is achieved through treatment and prevention.

Stocking density, slurry-contaminated yards, exposing the foot to wet conditions for long periods (especially around

## NORTHERN FARMER VET



Alistair Moir looks at the diseases, other than pneumonia, that affect cattle in winter when they are housed

the feeding area) and foot damage from uneven flooring surfaces all play a role in spreading DD. Some animals are thought to be more prone to DD than others and you will get repeat cases.

Your vet can advise you on the best treatment and prevention. This is best done with some "on-farm time" looking at cases and discussing management options.

Remember not to discount other causes of lameness. We think the cornerstone of treating any lameness case is to get the foot lifted up and have a good look.

**I have a few suckler cows with sore eyes. They are blinking a lot and holding one eye shut, and some have developed a white mark in the eye.**

In winter, we often see eye conditions as cattle feed close

together. Sensitivity to bright light, increased blinking and tear production are a sure sign of eye pain. A white mark can be caused by on-going infection or as a result of scar tissue formed as the eye heals.

Common causes of eye pain are: infections inside the eye itself, conjunctivitis (infection of the pink tissue around the eye), and injuries from straw or hay, scratching the surface of the eye. All eye conditions can be very painful and lead to reduced weight gain.

Silage eye is caused by listeria – bacteria that live in the soil. Cattle can be exposed to it at high levels through poor-quality silage. In mild cases, this can cause dullness and eye pain. In severe cases, the infection can spread through the nervous system leading to death.

Pink eye /New Forest eye

(contagious conjunctivitis) is less common in the winter as flies play a major part in spreading infection. It can still be seen in cold weather where stock are feeding close together at troughs or ring feeders.

Treatment for eye conditions takes the form of topical creams, sprays and powders, injections into the eyelid, and injections into the muscle or under the skin. There is a range of antibiotic and painkillers suitable for use. Consult your vet in the early stages of an outbreak for correct diagnosis and to determine the best treatment strategy.

## My young bulls are scratching a lot and losing hair. Is it anything to worry about?

Yes. Itching and scratching is very common in cattle at this time of year. This is often due to skin parasites. The confines of winter housing favour breeding of lice and mange mites as they spread by close contact.

All lice and mange mites cause similar signs of irritation – itching, bald patches and skin thickening. Although these parasites are said to have preferred areas on the host's body to feed, these areas often overlap, so we would take this approach to investigating a case.

First look for lice. There are two main types of cattle louse – sucking lice (which suck blood) and biting lice (which chew skin). It is important to identify which type of louse is causing the problem as this can affect treatment options.

Take a close look at the skin around the rubbed areas. Lice and lice eggs (sticking to hair shafts) can be seen with the naked eye and are easily visible with a magnifying glass. If lice are seen, take a hair pluck and gather some lice on the sticky side of some clear tape. Take them in to your practice for the vet to identify.

Animals with a particularly

high lice burden may be suffering from other underlying problems. Poor body condition, inadequate nutrition or mineral supplementation can contribute to an unusually high lice burden.

Treat all in-contact animals in the group, and accurately dose for weight to avoid developing resistance. Some products may need a repeat treatment to kill new lice hatching from eggs. Your vet will advise on the best treatment plan.

If there are no lice, there may be mange mites. There are three main types of mite seen in cattle in the UK. To identify mites, you will need to get the vet out to take skin scrapes. It is important to identify the cause of irritation as different mites respond better to different treatment programmes. These programmes can then be incorporated into your herd health plan and a suitable winter housing dose can be used as prevention the following year.



**BE VIGILANT:** keep a close watch for signs of illness in cattle housed for the winter

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