

# Cough might signify worm has hit herds



## PNEUMONIA IN CATTLE

**James Pattison BVSc MRCVS, right, of the Kingsway Veterinary Group, with advice on whether coughing heifers suggest illness**

healthy at turn out, an infection with lungworm – husk (or *Dictyocaulus viviparus* to give it its scientific name) – is the most common cause of coughing. This is especially true from midsummer onwards in a wet year.

### What does husk look like and how do I know if I have it?

Lungworm infection will cause groups of animals at

grass to struggle to get enough air. You will see them producing less milk, breathing more quickly and coughing at first.

Later they will lie down, neck outstretched to get more air in, and refuse to stand. Left untreated they can go on to die. You can confirm lungworm with a faecal sample submitted to your vet for a Baermann test, which will look for the larvae.

### How do I treat it?

The good news is that there has so far been no resistance detected in lungworm making infections relatively easy to treat with clear drenches or pour-ons. Bear in mind, however, that these medicines are broad spectrum and will treat more than just lungworm so it is always worth considering treatments in the context of an overall worm control strategy as set out in your health plan to ensure that you do not over-use products, leading to resistance. If in doubt, call your vet.

### How do I prevent it?

The larvae are excreted in the muck of infected animals; these do not need to be coughing as older animals become immune and will just carry a small number of adult worms. The larvae hatch in the gut

of the host, once excreted they climb onto a fungus growing in the muck from which they can be spread to neighbouring fields.

There is no real pattern as to when and where outbreaks occur as long as it is warm enough, so the key to control is building up immunity.

After the first season at grass, with enough exposure, animals are unlikely to have a problem again as they develop immunity to the worm, which will keep the disease in check. You can avoid this first season of production losses by vaccinating animals before they go out.

There is currently only one vaccine on the market that will protect against lungworm, this requires two treatments about four weeks apart.

The vaccine is made up of thousands of sterilised larvae, which mimics natural infection. To complete the process of establishing immunity though, the animals will need to be turned out onto contaminated pasture (i.e. grazed by older animals that season) to receive a challenge and they *must not be wormed* for the first half of the season at least as this will kill the vaccine.

This course is a one-off as long as animals are challenged. A common way of using the vaccine is to treat heifers before their first grazing season. This is slightly complicated by the fact that the vaccine is only available in the spring, so it is worth contacting your vet in plenty of time to discuss a lungworm control strategy.

## Grazing season may be the best time to bring in a tailored feed programme

TURNOUT should, in theory, bring welcome respite by offering the opportunity to ease back on supplementary feed and subsequent input costs to help ride out current low incomes.

However, increased production will give improved margins and profit, writes *Advanced Nutrition's veterinary nutritionist Debby Brown*.

● "The highest rate of profit is made at the margin, at the last bit of production, the last animal tended to, and the final productive input."

● "A farm's financial averages are made up of the outcome of a series of marginal decisions. The aggregate is the sum of a series of increments."

● "Previous average profitability is irrelevant to the decision being made."

These three statements were made by US nutritionist Dr John Fetrow, from the University of Minnesota, who was recently in UK offering advice on how to step up herd management and subsequent profitability. I believe each is important to consider when making decisions about feeding and managing animals.

Feed makes up, on average, 38 per cent of total variable costs. Consequently we need to evaluate our feeding systems and cost control. In general we use comparative benchmarks such as cost-per-cow or cost-per-litre. We need to be careful though since production drives the system.

Step back and ask yourself: what is holding my cows back from eating one more mouthful? Here are some examples.

Too heavily stocked? Then

consider cow slots in a barn. Will reducing stocking density increase overall yield or growth, improve cow health, and result in the same milk in the tank (or growth rate) without any more feed? The answer is usually yes.

Feed rails too low? Lifting these rails can be an easy solution to increasing dry matter intakes. Or try pushing up twice more in a day to see 1kg more in dry matter intake – both simple, quick solutions, which will result in higher production from feed levels.

I anticipate making more from grazed grass will be high on the spring agenda for many, at least for a percentage of cows in the herd, say low-risk, pregnant, or late-lactation cows, regardless of whether you roll out a rotational grazing or set stocking system.

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