THE WOOD VETERINARY GROUP

FARM NEWSLETTER MAY 2022

Spring Grazing – Grass Staggers/Hypomagnesaemia

With an everchanging weather pattern of cold overnight temperatures, dry spells and warm afternoons grass growth has been sporadic and may well continue that way through May. As with all spring grass we must be vigilant in monitoring production, but also nutritional value compared to winter forages. Spring grass is always very low in Magnesium, lower in fibre than stemmy late grass and has a high moisture content causing it to pass through the gut quickly. This speed of gut transit means that the animal can absorb very little of what Magnesium is present in the grass. Cattle require a daily dietary intake of Magnesium and use up a constant amount especially for milk production and oestrus activity. This is not just a challenge when at grass – those farms supplementing Magnesium and other minerals to housed cattle especially dry cows at an exposed feed face will experience runoff during wet weather.

Clinical Signs:

- Cows will twitch and be unsteady at walk. Affected animals can often be hyper excitable/hypersensitive to normal stimulation which can make them dangerous to handle
- Frothing around the mouth, excessive blinking and teeth grinding can also be seen
- Clinical signs in acute cases can progress quickly and often animals will just be found as a 'sudden death' – acute cases can be linked time wise to just after milking or bulling activity

Management:

- Ruminants cannot store magnesium and rely on daily dietary intake of 60g/cow/day of calcined magnesite or Cal Mag in the diet either in a concentrate feed, in a TMR or in water
    - Magnesium is very bitter and so it is vital to dose correctly and mix well into rations
- When adding Magnesium to water sources:
    - No other water source must be available
    - If the grazing is very wet, uptake of water from troughs may be low so increase the dose
    - Do not let Magnesium chloride accumulate in the bottom of troughs as it will stop cows drinking completely. Clean troughs more often when treated with Magnesium
- Start using Magnesium well before grazing. Cows do not store Magnesium well, so a "run-up" access period is required to ensure no cases straight after turnout
- Try and buffer feed animals with more fibrous foods at pasture to slow down gut passage and increase Magnesium intake (i.e. Silage or Hay)
- Avoid relying on mineral blocks as there can be a huge variation in how much individual cows use them, especially with dominant behaviours and bullying. This leaves cows still at risk of staggers
- Avoid Potash application on grazing pastures in the spring as this depresses the level of Magnesium found in grass (NB Slurry contains high levels of Potash so acts the same way) – graze pastures much later in the year that have had slurry or potash added

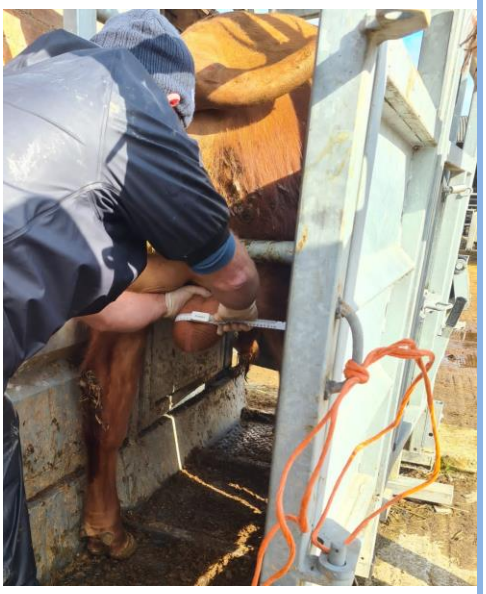
Magnesium deficiency is usually a combination of low magnesium levels and a stress event that triggers the disease. For most stock this will be adverse weather whilst out grazing but could also be events such as weaning calves for beef animals, bulling for spring block calving herds or water restriction for any stock. Try and minimise stressors at the most dangerous times of year for low Magnesium – spring and autumn.

Treating cows for hypomagnesaemia is often very unsuccessful so take preventative actions now

Beef Pre-Breed Decisions

A fully fertile bull run with 40-50 cows should achieve an average pregnancy rate to each service of 60%. This would result in 94% of cows being pregnant in a 9-week block. However, a sub-fertile bull that is achieving only a 40% pregnancy rate to each service, would result in only 78% of cows being pregnant in 9 weeks. Unfortunately, whilst it is rare to see full infertility, when tested 20-30% of bulls are found to be sub-fertile from either poor sperm quality or volume.

As beef suckler units measure production success based on kilos of beef weaned per number of cows put to the bull it is vital that both the cows and bulls are performing at peak levels. Reduced fertility will often result in either an extended calving block, with associated costs and labour issues or increased barren rates for that year. Any inflammatory processes e.g. lameness or a fever can damage sperm leading to a sub-fertile bull. Establishing breeding soundness prior to the season will ensure the greatest chance of success.



We recommend having all bulls tested, 6-10 weeks prior to the start of the service period every year. This allows time for bulls to be treated/recover from any issues and re-tested as the whole cycle of sperm production can take up to 60 days. Or worst-case scenario for any replacements bulls to be sourced and quarantined. Younger, new, and older bulls are especially high risk for performance issues so should be prioritised for checking. When purchasing new bulls, it is well worth investing in a fertility examination, but best practice is to test all bulls prior to every season.

A breeding soundness exam includes checking:

- Feet, legs, and locomotion (fundamental for service)
- Body condition score (aim for 3 - 3.5)
- Health treatments are up to date (vaccinations, blood samples for new purchases/accreditation, parasite control)
- Internal and external sexual organs (including testicle size/consistency)
- Semen quality (volume, density, motility and abnormalities). These parameters are assessed both on farm looking at progressive motility and using stained smears to look at sperm counts and abnormalities

Buying a new bull is a big investment and he needs to stay fit and fertile for at least 6 years to be cost effective. This allows him to pass on the genetic traits he was picked for and produce healthy, viable calves. Therefore, we need to make sure we always look after our bulls to get the best return. A breeding soundness exam will help identify issues early on as well as using information such as EBVs to select for desirable traits.

Early PD sessions at 4-6 weeks into the service window are also invaluable to highlight issues early on while some salvage procedures can be implemented. By scanning cows and heifers early in the breeding block we can make sure we are getting expected pregnancy rates and if needs be remove pregnant animals to reduce the challenge left for the last part of the block. We can also measure heifer's pelvic area at 13 months of age to identify those that are better suited to breeding, reducing the likely risk of caesareans and calving difficulty. If you are interested in either breeding soundness services, speak to us at the practice.