



## **Animal WOFs Newsletter – March/April 2013 –**



Welcome to another *Animal WOFs for Lifestyle Blocks* newsletter.

Each issue we are covering important animal health issues relevant for that time of year. Please feel free to give us feedback or ideas for the next issue, with any topics you would like to see covered.

### **In this issue:**

**Animal Health Diary – things to watch out for at this time of year – *Drought and post-drought animal care***

**Ryegrass staggers – Neuro disease caused by fungal mycotoxins**

**“Weed of the month”... an introduction to poisonous plants - Oleander**



# Animal Health Diary March/April



## The dangers of a drought...

Although we finally had a little bit of rain, the recent drought conditions are causing concern for farmers and their livestock for several reasons:



### 1) Feed shortages

Underfeeding in a drought can lead to metabolic problems like ketosis and mineral deficiencies. Desperate and hungry stock are also prone to ingesting toxic plants like ragwort, Goats's Rue, Stagger weed, oak, bracken fern and Tutu, which can potentially have disastrous consequences for their health and in some cases, cause death. Also keep pregnant animals away from Macrocarpa

trees as ingestion of these can cause abortions.

Monitor for any toxic weeds and if in doubt, rip it out...(and if needed take it to the vets for identification).

### 2) Access to water and shade

Ensure troughs are clean and filled daily as water intake will increase in hot and dry conditions. Dropping water levels in lakes and ponds can also increase the amount of blue-green algae which can potentially cause poisonings, severe disease and potentially sudden death in livestock and pets.

### 3) Nitrate poisoning

During drought conditions nitrate, which is normally present in plants at low levels, can build up in plants and reach toxic levels for livestock. Signs of nitrate poisoning in livestock include rapid breathing, muscle tremors, weakness, diarrhoea and death within a few hours following ingestion.

Suspect cases require urgent veterinary attention and administration of an antidote intravenously.

To minimise risk of nitrate poisoning, suspect pasture can be tested for nitrate levels at the lab. Also avoid letting hungry animals onto at risk pastures, avoid overstocking, and feed balanced rations of low nitrate feeds.



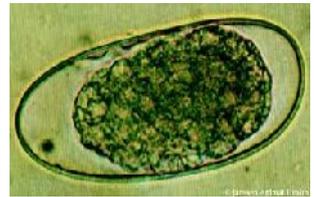


#### 4) Facial eczema and other fungal pasture diseases like Ryegrass staggers

This time of year often sees an increase in fungal toxins in the pasture, which can cause diseases like Facial Eczema or Ryegrass staggers. The fungi and toxins sit predominantly in the base of the plant and the dead matter. FE can cause severe liver damage and photosensitisation with skin burns, ryegrass staggers can cause neurological disease. For more information on ryegrass staggers please see our feature article this month.

#### 5) Barbers pole worm

Although parasite eggs generally don't survive in a drought due to insufficient moisture, once there is dew over night or some rain, worm burdens on pastures can rise quickly. This rise in worm burdens is caused by parasite larvae burrowing into the soil during a drought to await rain, then rapidly hatching with a little bit of moisture and rain, to be ingested by livestock.



Monitor animals closely for signs of Barber's Pole worm, like faecal staining along tail and back legs, diarrhoea, weight loss, lethargy and pale gums.

We now have a new oral wormer for sheep in stock, Exodus, which we can dispense for small block holders. Exodus has persistent activity for Haemonchus (Barbers Pole worm).



#### 6) Flystrike and Pink Eye

Although fly burdens have settled down a bit, be on the lookout for flystrike and check your animals regularly. Consider fly repellents like Cyrex to protect your stock.

Flies can also transmit Pink Eye, a contagious eye disease which can cause blindness, so check your stock regularly for weepy eyes, conjunctivitis and signs of blindness.

If you would like further information on any of these, please contact your team of vets at the clinic on 368 2891 or email [animalwof@lhvc.co.nz](mailto:animalwof@lhvc.co.nz).

## **Ryegrass staggers...** **Neuro disease caused by fungal mycotoxins...**

Ryegrass staggers is caused by a mycotoxin called Lolitrem B produced by the fungal endophyte *Neotyphodium lolii*, which grows inside the cells of perennial ryegrass towards the base of the plant.

Ryegrass staggers can occur on most grazing species following ingestion of the mycotoxins. This includes cattle, sheep, goats, deer, horses and camelids like Llamas and Alpacas, throughout New Zealand.

All ages of animals can be affected as long as they are grazing perennial ryegrass and outbreaks may be seen over several age groups.

Although the fungus is present in the pasture most of the time, outbreaks occur mainly in summer and autumn when feed is in short supply and animals are grazing closer to the ground and thus ingesting more toxins.



*Ryegrass pasture*

**Ryegrass** staggers should not be confused with **Grass** staggers, which is magnesium deficiency often seen in cattle around calving.

### **Clinical signs:**

Hardly any abnormalities are noticeable when the animals are grazing calmly and observed from a distance, but immediately become apparent when animals are disturbed and made to walk or run.

Clinical signs may range from mild to severe in the following order:

- Slight head tremors and mild muscle twitching
- Head nodding and jerky limb movements
- Swaying and staggering during movement
- Stiff-legged, stilted gait with short bouncing steps
- Collapse onto the ground with splayed hind legs
- Death occurs from misadventure like falling into ponds or troughs

When left undisturbed, most affected animals should be able to slowly rise and walk off in their own time.



*Note the wide-based stance in this calf.*

## **Diagnosis:**

There are a few other diseases that can present with similar clinical signs to Ryegrass Staggers.

These include Polioencephalomalacia (a similar nervous disease caused by reduced levels of B vitamins in the body), lead poisoning, Listeriosis (an infection in the brain caused by the bacterium *Listeria*), brain abscesses or meningitis as well as the metabolic conditions grass staggers (low blood magnesium levels) and ketosis (energy deficit).

The combination of clinical signs, like running a fever, blindness, head tilts and similar can help a vet narrow down the problem list.

## **Treatment:**

There is no specific treatment for Ryegrass staggers, but moving animals off the affected pasture and feeding safe hay or safe pastures will usually lead to resolution of clinical signs within 1-2 weeks.

The effects of Lolitrem B are almost always reversible as the toxin does not permanently damage the nervous system.

The main danger with affected animals is death by misadventure, like falling and drowning in drains or falling into electric fences, as they can be very wobbly and incoordinated, so keep affected livestock safe in flat paddocks without waterways and avoid stressing them until recovered.



## **Prevention:**

There are “endophyte-free” ryegrass species available, but as the endophyte and the ryegrass live in a mutually beneficial relationship, endophyte-free pastures don't grow nearly as well as normal ryegrass will.

The plant provides nutrients to the fungal endophyte while it in turn will protect the plant from insects and pests and enhance the plants growth.

As the fungus is most common in the plant base and seedheads, avoiding grazing of these parts can reduce the risk of ryegrass staggers.

Also feeding supplements like silage, hay, pellets and others can help to reduce the risk of ryegrass staggers.

## “Weed of the month”...

### This month featuring: - Oleander -

#### **Description:**

This ornamental garden plant is one of the most toxic plants in the world. It has elongated pointy leaves with a prominent midrib. Large clusters of red, pink or white flowers develop in late spring or early summer.



#### **Distribution:**

Oleander is mainly found in the North Island and north of the South Island, as a garden plant or in shrubby areas.

#### **Species affected:**

All species, including humans, can be affected by ingestion of oleander. All parts of the plant are toxic, including leaves, bark, flowers, fruit and even honey made from oleander flowers. There have also been reports of people dying after eating meat cooked on skewers made of oleander and a single leaf would be enough to kill a cow.

#### **Clinical signs:**

The toxic compound of oleander is very similar to digitalis, causing heart and neurological problems leading to irregular pulses, convulsions, fever, vomiting and abdominal pain, collapse and paralysis preceding death. Clinical signs occur rapidly following ingestion of parts of the oleander plant.

#### **Diagnosis of poisoning:**

This is often based on access to the plant, evidence of the plant having been grazed, presence of plant in the rumen or stomach at post mortem examination and clinical signs.



#### **Treatment:**

Treatment would be symptomatic, like attempts at decontamination and removal of toxins from the stomach and blood stream, but as the effects of oleander are rapid, prognosis is very poor.

Prevention is the key, so as pretty as these plants are, they should not be grown around livestock and it would pay to remove children's access to oleander as well.

Remember not to throw any garden clippings over the fence to your livestock as even one single leaf could be enough to kill.



Solving farming in a drought?

On that note, and crossing my fingers that there will be more rain and warm weather to encourage some grass growth before winter hits...

Looking forward to see you at the clinic or at your place,

Step of the team  
@ LHVC.

Levin & Horowhenua Vets

518 Queen Street, Levin

Ph: 06 368 2891

Fax: 06 368 4003

Email: [animalwof@lhvc.co.nz](mailto:animalwof@lhvc.co.nz)