



Cattle vet Debby Brown, from the Barnard Castle-based Castle Vet Group, takes a look at health and welfare issues that are affecting dairy herds across the UK. In this issue she offers some timely tips on preventing and treating hypomagnesaemia, or grass staggers.

Spotting cows that are 'on the brink' is key to successful treatment

Watch for spring staggers

With turnout fast approaching, producers should refresh their knowledge of hypomagnesaemia – or grass staggers. It's not rife across the UK, but there are areas that see more cases than others. Grass and soil type and fertiliser use all play a role, as does the rate of grass growth.

A huge risk factor is turning cows and heifers out onto lush grass; increased on land with a lot of fertiliser applied. Any rapidly growing spring grass has the potential to be low in magnesium and cause a problem.

So, what to look out for? Sub-clinical cases, as with any disease, are difficult to spot. But look out for reduced milk yield and mild behavioural changes – cows may be a little hyper sensitive and jumpy.

There's no mistaking clinical cases. Cows can't store magnesium and will quickly succumb to a deficit and 'go down', so spotting cows that are 'on the brink' is key to quick and successful treatment. Look for cattle that are 'staggering' and have their heads up. Animals are often found dead in the field if they're not identified quickly enough, so if grazing conditions are thought to pose a risk it's well worth keeping a closer eye on cattle until the danger period passes.

Some producers who frequently have problems even administer magnesium boluses before turnout, to get their herd through the lush growth period in early spring. Feeding hay and dry fodder can also reduce the risk. An 'at risk' herd or unit will see at least one bad clinical case per year.



The encyclopaedia **Hypomagnesaemia (grass staggers)**

Cause

Magnesium deficiency in lush spring – but also sometimes in autumn – grazing. The cow's requirement is quickly exceeded by her intake when dietary levels are low, since the cow is unable to store magnesium within the body. Any changes to fertiliser programmes and regimes should also be noted, as this could increase the risk of cows developing grass staggers, particularly if the fertiliser is high in potassium.

Symptoms

Sub-clinical signs include milk yield drop and nervous behaviour. More extreme

clinical signs include tremors and staggering and cows also tend to hold their heads up. Cows will go down and may even be found dead.

Treatment

Immediately administer 400ml of 25% magnesium solution subcutaneously before calling the vet. The vet will then give the cow magnesium and calcium intravenously and occasionally – in bad cases – a sedative to calm the cow's nerves. Once up she should be given a magnesium bolus.

Prevention

Where grass staggers is a recurring annual problem, magnesium boluses can offer some protection. Boluses for adult cows contain 40g of magnesium and two boluses should ideally be given two to three days prior to the expected period of risk.

