



West Sussex-based dairy vet Maarten Boers, from The Livestock Partnership, gives us the lowdown on an extremely rare, but fatal, disease that struck on a unit in Wiltshire this autumn.

Fatal disease is rare, but recent cases in Wiltshire highlight risks

Anthrax alert

It's been almost 10 years since anthrax was seen on a British farm, so confirmation of two cases in cattle on a Wiltshire-based dairy unit in October came as a shock. It's a notifiable disease so the unit was closed down, as a precaution, for 30 days. The good news is that there have been no further cases. Vet investigations to identify the source of the outbreak were on going as CowManagement went to press.

The most recent outbreak prior to this was in Wales, back in 2006, when two cattle died from the disease. In that case the anthrax outbreak was the result of disturbing a carcass burial site during building works on the farm.

Infection is either through ingesting or inhaling the spores and, once inside the animal, they multiply extremely quickly and release toxins. Like other clostridial diseases, it's these toxins, rather than the bacteria themselves, that do the damage. In anthrax, the toxins cause multiple organ failure.

The disease is highly infectious and contagious. In cattle the disease is acute and usually results in sudden death without any symptoms. If symptoms are seen they can easily be mistaken for other diseases and conditions.

Any 'sudden deaths' should be reported to DEFRA, via your vet. It's then up to them to determine the cause of death. A blood sample is taken from the ear of the dead animal, in the first instance, and tested for anthrax.

If cattle with anthrax are seen alive, symptoms include malaise, a high temperature and blood coming from both nostrils. But the spores, once inside the body, act very quickly and animals are typically dead within a matter of a few hours.



The encyclopaedia **Anthrax**

Cause

A bacterium from the Clostridium family, anthrax spores can survive in the soil for decades, if not centuries. Ground or building works can disturb the spores and release them into the environment.

Symptoms

It's rare to see symptoms as the onset of anthrax is sudden and progresses to almost certain death within hours. Producers may see listless, depressed cattle with a high temperature.

But these symptoms also fit many other non-notifiable diseases. One tell-tale sign is bleeding from both nostrils.

Diagnosis and treatment

Diagnosis is typically post mortem. All 'sudden deaths' must be reported to DEFRA, but remember that the disease is extremely rare. Rarer still is finding an animal with 'clinical' anthrax – most die too quickly for symptoms to be seen.

Prevention

Keep cattle away from areas where ground works are being carried out – such as digging ditches and drains. It's also important to find out, if you don't already know, where any former carcass burial sites are on your unit. Keep cattle away and avoid disturbing the soil in these areas.

