



Specialist cattle vet Debby Brown says that producers should keep an extra close eye on coughing calves this autumn because cases of *Mycoplasma bovis* infection are on the increase.

## Look out for unresponsive or chronic cases

# Persistent cough

**M**ycoplasma is thought to be present in around 70% of UK dairy herds, so it's little wonder that vets are seeing an increasing number of outbreaks in calves. The key strain seen in herds is *Mycoplasma bovis*.

It causes symptoms similar to those caused by other respiratory diseases in calves, such as coughing and dullness (pneumonia). And, interestingly, it is the most common pathogen found in cattle with chronic and unresponsive pneumonia and fatal bronchopneumonia. It is also linked to inflammatory lung lesions.

Clinical signs to look out for in calves include a dry and hacking cough, low-grade fever, runny eyes, or ear droop. The latter is often the result of a painful ear infection. Calves will, of course, also go off their feed and exhibit the usual signs of lethargy and ill thrift.

It enters herds through bought-in animals and is spread – from animal to animal – by close contact. The increase in cases seen in calves may be the result of the increased use of automatic calf feeders on UK units, because not all models will disinfect the teat between calf feeds. Milk can also contain large numbers of the organism.

*M. bovis* is resistant to many antibiotics and avoids being attacked by the animal's immune system because it mutates rapidly. Key advice for producers is to disinfect teats between feeds and make sure that colostrum feeding protocols are in place – and strictly followed – to help protect young calves against possible infection.



## The encyclopaedia ***Mycoplasma bovis***

### Diagnosis

Blood samples can be taken to check for antibodies to *Mycoplasma bovis* and nasal swabs can also be tested.

### Prevention

Effective colostrum management in calves is vital and good calf house ventilation will also help to reduce the spread of the disease, as will reducing stocking density and other potential stressors. Disinfecting teats between feeds is also important, particularly where automatic feeders are in use. In herds with a known mycoplasma problem, an autogenous (farm-specific) vaccine can be effective and worth the investment.

### Control

Early recognition, diagnosis and treatment are vital. Infected calves should be isolated and prescribed vet treatment.

### Treatment

Prolonged, targeted and routine treatment – for example two weeks of in-feed treatment for calves – is the only way to tackle the infection.

Giving animals antibiotics on a metaphylactic basis, to eliminate or minimise an expected outbreak of disease, could be one option on some units where mycoplasma has been found.

But using antibiotics can be problematic in itself as mycoplasma is becoming resistant to most of them.

