

Ration formulation, as well as mixing and monitoring, are all key to controlling an all-too-common condition. Vet Philip Wilkinson, from Cumbria-based XLVets practice Paragon Veterinary Group, tells us more.

Look out for signs of SARA this winter

Count chews per cud

Clinical acidosis is rarely seen in UK dairy herds, but the less severe sub-acute ruminal acidosis (SARA) is common among early- and mid-lactation cows. The symptoms can often go unnoticed, but estimates are that SARA could be costing the UK dairy industry as much as £25m each year.

Wet, acidic and poorer quality silages being fed on many units this year means that producers should be particularly vigilant for signs of SARA this winter. Because silage quality (energy) is low this year, producers will be tempted to add starchy feeds to their rations in a bid to maintain and improve milk yields. But feeding a 'hot' ration is not without risk. Rapidly fermentable ingredients will increase the risk of SARA, as will 'slug' feeding concentrates in the parlour or out-of-parlour feeders. Little and often is the key and never more than 2kg of concentrate per feed. The total cost of the condition is undoubtedly much higher once treatment costs and the impact on cow health and fertility are taken into account. SARA is implicated in reduced fertility, increased lameness and a higher incidence of lameness, along with an increased susceptibility to mycotoxins and pathogenic bacteria as a result of the acidic rumen environment. Cows suffering from SARA are also more prone to production diseases such as mastitis, LDA and endometritis, as well as risk of developing liver abscesses.

If you think that your cows may be showing signs of SARA, get your vet or nutritionist involved.



The encyclopaedia Sub-acute rumen acidosis (SARA)

Cause

A drop in rumen pH, which is the result of feeding a ration with a high acidic load. Often the result of adding high starch, rapidly fermentable feeds to compensate for poor quality silage.

Symptoms

Depressed milk yields and/or low milk butterfats, below 3%, are often seen. Cows exhibit poor cudging, loose dung, tail swishing (dirty flanks), variable and low feed intakes, and poor fibre and grain digestion.

Diagnosis

To rule out SARA, your vet could take

a sample (just 2 or 3ml) of rumen liquor from a dozen cows in your herd, and check pH and microbe population. A healthy rumen pH should be above 6 and, viewed under a microscope, microbes should be lively and 'swirl' around.

Treatment/prevention

Formulate rations to produce the right balance of energy release in the rumen. And accurate and thorough ration mixing ensures that cows actually eat the planned ration – and can't sort through it.

Pay close attention to the chop length of straw to minimise sorting (aim for 5cm) and include a moist feed or liquid feed if rations are dry or unpalatable. Both will help to promote consistent intakes. And make sure the ration stimulates rumen function and promotes cudging. Aim for at least 60 chews per cud. This will ensure good saliva production, which is the cow's best natural rumen buffer.

