



Somerset-based vet and senior partner at Origin Group's FarmVets SouthWest, David Taylor, talks about pica and why it's a sign that salt or mineral deficiencies, or acidosis, may be an issue in some UK dairy herds.

Strange behaviour can be a sign of salt or mineral deficiency

Eating disorder

Pica in dairy cows is farm specific and sporadic, and the cause will vary. Cattle may drink urine or eat faeces, soil, wood, stones, bones or clay. It's fairly common – we see it in five or six herds each year.

It's not a condition or a sign of disease, but rather a symptom of a deficiency – typically salt or mineral in nature. Cows seen drinking urine are usually looking for salt, but they may also be suffering from acidosis and 'self medicating' by ingesting something alkaline. Cows drinking urine is certainly not something to dismiss as 'normal'. That said, some cows will then do it out of habit, even when the 'cause' has been rectified. Make a note of any 'habitual' cows in your herd.

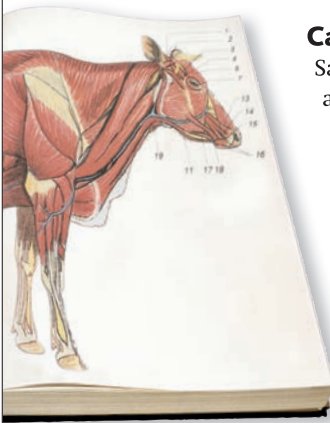
If producers see cows drinking urine, they should first try to curb it by providing rock salt. This will stop the behaviour if it's the result of salt deficiency and salt will also help to provide a degree of acidosis relief. Cows must also be checked for any other signs of acidosis and rations must be balanced accordingly. In most instances, no economic signals – such as milk drop – are seen with salt deficiency. If the cause is acidosis, however, there will be other signs to look out for.

Cows eating soil and rocks may be looking to boost their mineral levels. The most common pica 'deficiency' after salt is phosphorus (P). Cows can eat up to two kilogrammes of soil a day with no ill effect. P deficiency, on the other hand, will result in poor milk production and fertility. So it needs to be addressed quickly and effectively. This tends to be a problem when cows are out at grass – particularly during extended grazing.

Pica can also be a sign of potassium (K) deficiency, but this is rare in the UK because K levels in grass silage are typically high.



The encyclopaedia **Pica**



Causes

Salt or mineral deficiency. Acidosis and, also, sometimes it is just habitual.

Symptoms

Drinking urine and/or faeces. And eating soil, stones, clay, bones or wood.

Treatment

Since the disorder is caused by either salt or mineral

deficiency, or acidosis, treatment will vary. Providing salt licks, balancing rations – perhaps adding a buffer to TMRs – to increase and stabilise rumen pH, and also ensuring that the mineral requirements of the herd are also being met, will all help to curb the behaviour. It's important to remember that some cows will continue to exhibit pica behaviour, out of habit, even when deficiencies or rumen pH issues have been resolved.

Prevention

Ensure that cows' rations are well balanced for salt and minerals. And that rumen pH is optimal and relatively stable.