

**Sudden death in cattle is a distressing event and always a cause of concern on farm. As we head into late summer and autumn there are a few causes to be aware of and be informed of how to approach each situation. This is a basic overview of the major causes but if you have any concerns or wish to discuss any of these further, please feel free to contact us!**

### Anthrax

Although very rare, anthrax is a notifiable disease. An infectious soil-borne bacteria causing sudden death, typically with a bloody discharge coming from the nose, mouth and other openings. The last UK livestock case was in 2006. If you are concerned about this phone the practice immediately.

### Grass staggers

Grass staggers occur when there is a lack of magnesium in the cow resulting in increased excitability, muscle spasms, "staggering around", seizure, collapse or sudden death. If found dead, they often have visible signs of trauma and are covered in debris or mud (usually from thrashing on the ground). This is most likely to occur during periods of lush grass growth when nutrient levels are low (e.g., Spring and Autumn) and is most common in summer suckler cows with calves at foot.



### Treatment:

Approach quietly! Give a bottle of magnesium (Magniject 9) under the skin (NEVER GIVE IV!) across multiple sites is the treatment of choice (if you are able to do so safely). Calciject no. 5 contains a small amount of magnesium and you can give IV in addition to sub cut magnesium. Sometimes sedation is needed to control seizures if they are thrashing. Unfortunately, these animals go downhill quickly and often die before being treated.

### Prevention:

Supplementing with magnesium is usually recommended during Spring and Autumn to prevent "staggers" from occurring. Supplement feeding with hay/ silage or using licks and boluses.

### Clostridial diseases

Clostridia are bacteria commonly found in the environment including soil. There are many different strains of the bacteria, all of which cause a variety of diseases, often resulting in sudden death. It is one of the more common causes of sudden death. Below are a few diseases caused by clostridia:

- Enterotoxaemia
- Blackleg
- Tetanus
- Botulism
- Pulpy kidney
- Blacks disease

Clostridial diseases are very difficult to successfully treat and often unrewarding, as such prevention is much more appropriate. There are multiple vaccines available for cattle which cover various different strains. If you have any concerns regarding this or wish to discuss clostridia further, please contact us.

### Acidosis/ Bloat

Feeding cattle too many highly digestible carbohydrates such as barley or concentrates can result in acidosis and gassy bloat. If not treated quickly and properly this will progress to collapse and death. If you suspect a cow has bloat, then reducing the gas in the rumen is essential – this can be done by passing a stomach tube into the rumen. Once the bloat is removed it is essential to correct the rumen pH and support the cow's immune system. We can do this by giving them oral fluids with antacids and administering vitamin B1 and antibiotics.

### Pneumonia

Pneumonia can cause progressive deterioration or in some cases sudden death in both calves and in adult cows! Acute pasteurellosis and viral pneumonias can cause sudden death in any age of cattle, however it is most common in animals aged between 3-24 months old. Signs are usually associated with fever resulting in dullness, inappetence, increased respiratory rate or a "snotty nose". Prompt treatment can resolve clinical signs.

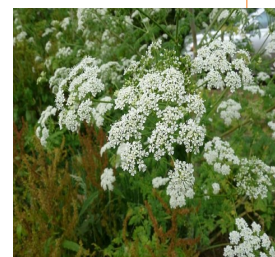


### Fog Fever

Fog fever is a respiratory condition which occurs in adult suckler cattle (in particular Herefords) typically when moved onto lush autumn grass which is high in the plant protein "tryptophan". Signs include difficulty breathing, coughing or frothing at the mouth. There is currently no specific treatment although anti-inflammatories may help with symptoms.

### Toxins

Cattle are inquisitive animals and are likely to find anything they shouldn't eat! Lead batteries, various plants (yew, hemlock) and nitrate poisoning can all cause sudden death. If you are concerned about this cause of death, it is worth checking around field boundaries to make sure no poisonous plant clippings have been dumped.



### What to do when you encounter sudden death.

1. Phone AHPA to report.
2. Call the vets to discuss the case (as soon as possible- the fresher the carcass the better).
3. After discussing the case, we may suggest to post mortem the animal. We can do this on farm.
4. Arrange for collection of carcass - ideally as soon as the post mortem is complete.

All the best,  
**Keir Hamilton BVMS MRCVS**



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