

July 2016

### ERGOT IN PASTURES

Ergot is a fungus that grows on the seed head of grasses. Cereals like rye and wheat have been affected most often historically, but forage grasses like brome and fescue and wheatgrasses also are susceptible. Weather like we have experienced this year – a cool, wet spring followed by hot, humid summer conditions – is ideal for ergot to develop.

Ergot produces alkaloids that cause vasoconstriction of small arteries, which restricts blood flow to extremities like the tips of tails and ears as well as to feet and legs. Lameness, swelling of the fetlock and hock joints, and even loss of hooves can occur. Animals also are less able to dissipate heat so they spend more time than usual standing in shade or water.

Ergot bodies look a lot like mouse droppings in grass seedheads. They are blackish or dark brown or purple and shaped like a cylinder. Examine your pastures and hay fields for these ergot bodies. An occasional one here and there shouldn't be a problem but if they show up in most of your seedheads, remove any grazing animals.

Ergot remains fairly stable in hay so if it is present, either destroy the hay or dilute it severely with other safe feed. Fields can be shredded to remove seedstalks but don't resume grazing until enough regrowth develops to restrict animals from eating the old, shredded clippings.

Ergot toxicity is rare in our pastures but be on the lookout so it doesn't become a problem for your animals.

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