



April 20, 2018

WATCH OUT FOR GRASS TETANY THIS YEAR

Grass tetany, sometimes called grass staggers, is a metabolic disorder of cattle related to a deficiency of magnesium (Mg). Early lactation cows are the most susceptible, with older cows considered more susceptible than those with their first or second calves.

Why might this be more of an issue this year? It's because of our weather pattern. With the first half of April as much as 20 degrees below normal temperatures, farmers are wondering when a long-term warm-up is in sight and when pastures will finally take off. If our weather is in a stormy period and it warms up quickly in May, our pastures are primed to take off rapidly.

Grass tetany usually occurs in the spring and is typically seen in early lactation cows grazing cool-season grasses during cool, cloudy, and rainy weather and often occurs when cool weather is followed by a warm period. Rapidly growing, lush grasses create the greatest problem. Grass tetany has occurred on a wide range of cool-season grass and small grain pastures. The greatest risk for grass tetany is when pasture soils are low in available magnesium, high in available potassium, and high in nitrogen. High rates of nitrogen and potassium fertilizer are sometimes associated with increased tetany problems.

Suspect forages should be analyzed. Forages containing less than 0.2 percent magnesium, more than 3 percent potassium, and more than 4 percent nitrogen (25 percent crude protein) are likely candidates to create grass tetany problems.

Dietary imbalances also affect susceptibility to grass tetany. Studies have shown that inadequate salt intake may increase susceptibility to grass tetany. Consumption of salt and magnesium simultaneously may be critical to increasing magnesium absorption. Also, feeding high levels of potassium result in reduced magnesium absorption.

Unfortunately, in many cases of grass tetany, symptoms are not noted and the only evidence is a dead cow. In mild cases, milk yield is decreased, and the animal is nervous. These signs indicate the need for preventive measures. Animals affected by acute grass tetany may suddenly stop grazing, appear uncomfortable, and show unusual signs of alertness, such as staring and keeping their heads and ears in an erect position. Cows may also stagger, have twitching skin (especially on the face, ears, and flanks), and lie down and get up frequently.

To prevent grass tetany, first wait to graze until grass is more than 6 inches tall. Also, feed or graze legumes like clover or alfalfa when you start on pasture since they have high magnesium levels.

Feeding about 10 to 20 grams per day of supplemental magnesium via commercial or home-made salt-mineral mixes may be the best way to reduce tetany problems, but start supplementing as much as thirty days before grazing begins. Magnesium oxide is one of the best and cheapest sources of magnesium. Mix equal parts of magnesium oxide with dical, salt, and ground corn for a simple home-made supplement that provides adequate magnesium when each cow eats about one pound of the mix per week. Using management practices to transition cattle over to a lush growth environment is always an excellent practice. As always, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.



More information on grass tetany and its symptoms go to: beef.unl.edu In the search feature in the upper right type the key words grass tetany.

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