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BOVINE COCCIDIOSIS

Coccidiosis can cause significant economic losses in cattle. Although most cattle are exposed to coccidia and infected, most of the infections are self-limiting and mild or asymptomatic. The parasites that cause this condition are members of the species *Eimeria*, and the most important of this species for causing disease in cattle are *Eimeria bovis* and *Eimeria zuernii*.

The life cycle of these parasites is complex. Single cell **oocysts** are passed in the feces of cattle, are resistant to disinfectants, and can remain in the environment (particularly moist, shady areas) for long periods of time and maintain their infectivity. The oocysts sporulate and these sporulated oocysts are ingested by the host and the **sporozoites** are released in the intestine. Sporozoites enter the intestinal cells, form **trophozoites**, which in turn divide into many **merozoites**. These merozoites penetrate additional intestinal epithelial cells and form more **meronts**. Eventually, **macrogametes** and **microgametes** are formed which combine to produce the next generation of oocysts. When the oocysts are mature, they rupture the host cell and are released into the lumen of the intestine and pass out in the feces. The reproduction of these organisms is phenomenal as illustrated by the following:

1 oocyst
X 8 sporozoites
X 120,000 first generation merozoites
X 30 second generation merozoites
X 80% macrogametocytes
= 23,040,000 oocysts

The potential damage to the intestinal cells is obvious. It is estimated that as few as 50,000 infective oocysts ingested by a young susceptible calf can cause severe disease. The replication of the coccidia within the host's intestinal cells and the subsequent rupture of the cells is responsible for the disease and the clinical signs that develop. The severity of the disease is directly related to the dose of infective oocysts that are ingested. The more oocysts ingested, the more severe the subsequent disease. With light infections, the damage to the gut cells is minimal and because the cells in the gastrointestinal tract are replaced rapidly the damage is quickly repaired. In the case of heavy infections, about two weeks after the oocysts are ingested, most of the epithelial cells at the base of the intestinal glands are occupied by meronts or gametocytes. As these cells rupture, damage is severe and there is loss of blood into the feces. Also, fluid, electrolytes, and blood proteins (albumin) are lost.

Most animals infected with coccidia do not show signs of illness. This is due to the normally low dose and after a course of infection the animal is immune to that particular *Eimeria* species. However, this does not mean they are immune to all *Eimeria* species. Therefore, coccidiosis is primarily a disease of the young where there is crowding, stress, and/or nonimmune animals. Older cows certainly act as a reservoir and shed oocysts into the environment. Stress such as shipping, weaning, dietary changes, steroid therapy, and other problems can precipitate an outbreak of coccidiosis. Older cattle immune to their own endemic species of coccidia can become infected and/or ill when moved to a new herd and exposed to a different species.

The clinical signs of coccidiosis can include the following:

Diarrhea (bloody at times)
Straining (tenesmus)
Loss of appetite
Fever (slight)
Debility
Death (in severe cases)

Many cattle are affected and experience weight loss or decreased weight gains without showing obvious illness and these cattle account for the majority of the economic losses.

Your veterinarian can diagnose coccidiosis on the basis of clinical signs, fecal oocysts examinations, and post mortem examination of dead animals (if that occurs). Once an accurate diagnosis is made there are a number of drugs useful in treatment or prevention. Some of the drugs that can be used for **treatment** include:

Amprolium Corid® 10 mg/kg daily for 5 days
Sulfaquinoxaline 2.72 mg/kg daily for 3-5 days
Sulfamethazine 110 mg/kg daily for 5 days

Some of these drugs and dosages may require a veterinarian's prescription and extended withdrawal time, be sure to check with your veterinarian before treating animals. Drugs can be very useful in helping to **prevent** coccidiosis and some of these are listed below:

Lasalocid Bovatec® 1 mg/kg per day, maximum 360 mg/day
Decoquinate Deccox® 22.7 mg/100 lb. daily for 28 days
Monensin Rumensin® 100 to 360 mg/head per day

Both lasalocid and monensin are polyether ionophores which are used to increase feed efficiency and weight gains; however, they also have effectiveness to prevent (but not for treatment of) coccidiosis. Monensin has a lower threshold for toxicity and cattle must be gradually introduced to it in their diet to prevent diarrhea, feed refusal, or toxicity. **Drugs useful for treatment are not necessarily useful for prevention and vice versa.** Drugs administered in feed or water may not be consumed by sick animals, so you must be aware of this in treating ill cattle.

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