Coccidiosis can hit calves hard

Coccidiosis is a growing concern in calf rearing, as vet **Dr Tim Potter** of the Westpoint Veterinary Group told his audience at the recent National Youngstock Conference at Hartpury College.

Calf scour is the most common disease in young calves, accounting for around 50% of all calf deaths.

There are a number of different organisms that can cause scour in calves. Viruses such as rotavirus and coronavirus are widespread and commonly cause watery diarrhoea in young calves. These can be controlled through vaccination of cows prior to calving coupled with ensuring calves receive sufficient colostrum.

Various bacteria can also cause scour – E coli, Salmonella and Clostridia all cause severe diarrhoea in calves. The two other main infectious causes of scours in calves are cryptosporidiosis and coccidiosis.

Scour pathogens can be identified by examination of faecal samples from affected calves. It is important to diagnose what is the cause of the scours to ensure the correct treatment is given and enable measures to be put in place to minimise the chance of occurrence in the future.

Coccidiosis has been causing increasing numbers of problems over the last few years, both in terms of clinical disease and also by causing reduced growth rates. The number of cases diagnosed by the Veterinary Laboratories Agency has increased over the last 10 years.

So what is coccidiosis? Coccidiosis is a disease caused by coccidian – these are small protozoan parasites which cause damage to the intestinal tract of cattle following ingestion. Environmental burdens result in nearly all farm animal species being exposed to coccidia over the course of their lifetime. High levels of environmental challenge commonly occur in modern farming systems with adults serving as carriers of disease and contributing towards environmental contamination.

The clinical signs will depend on the severity of the infection. In the most severe form animals will pass diarrhoea containing blood or mucus – these animals will show signs of dehydration and may be seen to strain to pass faeces. Less severely affected animals will show signs of ill thrift and are frequently observed to pass a pale pasty scour. These animals will have reduced feed intakes and will show poorer growth rates.

In severe coccidiosis, calves can suffer diarrhoea and pass blood or mucus.

Typically clinical signs are seen in animals between three weeks and six months of age, although cattle up to two years of age, and occasionally older, are increasingly being seen with the disease.

Diagnosis is based on the presence of clinical findings in a group of calves and through examination of faecal samples. Producers should consult with their veterinary surgeon if they suspect coccidiosis on their unit. The vet will then be able to advise on the diagnosis and correct treatment of the condition.

Prevention

The most effective method of minimising the effect of coccidiosis is prevention, and this can be accomplished by a combination of good hygiene and the use of an in-feed coccidiostat such as decoquinate.

For milk-fed calves, the intakes of hard starter feed are often variable and so very young animals risk not receiving a full dose of decoquinate. To address this issue, Vetsonic has developed Vetcox PRO which can be administered in milk powder. Producers should speak to their vet for more information.

In data presented at the conference the use of Vetcox Pro in milk prevented clinical coccidiosis. This resulted in an increase in daily liveweight gain of 200g per day when compared to a control group of calves which did not receive any anti-coccidial therapy.

While steps can be taken to treat the different forms of calf diarrhoea, hygiene and cleanliness are paramount in the prevention and control of all calf scour.