

COW/CALF CORNER

The Newsletter

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Dallisgrass Staggers?

By Brian Freking and Dave Sparks, DVM

Dallisgrass Staggers are seen in some years when conditions favor the development of fungus. Although the condition is not uncommon in Eastern Oklahoma, this year, due to wet weather it has turned up in other areas of Oklahoma where it is almost never seen.

Dallisgrass (*Paspalum dilatatum*) seed heads are often infected with the fungus *Claviceps paspali*. Fungal spores germinate in the flower, grow in the premature seed and produce honeydew that is transferred to other seed heads by insects. In an infected flower, a fungal body, or sclerotium, forms instead of a seed. The sclerotium is round and up to 1/8 inch across with a cream-colored center. Its outer coat may vary from white to orange, red or black because of other fungi growing on the ergot body.

Many seed heads include normal seed, honeydew and sclerotia. The seed heads have been described as resembling partially popped popcorn. This fungus also infects and produces toxins in other *Paspalum* species such as brownseed paspalum and bahiagrass. The toxic agent in the Sclerotia on *Paspalum* grasses is paspalitrems, the mycotoxins responsible for dallisgrass staggers. Most cattle poisonings result when the cattle eat mature seed heads in the pasture. Calves are known to selectively eat seed heads with honeydew. Horses are not usually poisoned unless they consume *Paspalum* hay that contains ergot.

Poisoned cattle and horses demonstrate similar signs, including: hyperexcitability, uncontrollable muscular tremors, incoordination, falling when forced to exercise, and inability to regain their feet. Cattle usually recover when they are removed from ergotized pastures unless there is misadventure, such as falling headlong into water or limb breakage, or if they go down in the sun and die of exposure or lack of water. Horses with nervous ergotism tend to be destructive, often injuring themselves, sometimes requiring euthanasia.

To treat for nervous ergotism, remove the source from the animals' diet. Some severely poisoned horses have recovered after a few days in a padded surgical recovery room. Cattle almost always recover if they are moved to shade, fed and watered. To prevent poisoning, managers must be able to recognize ergot infected seed heads and prevent livestock from consuming them. Remove the seed heads by mowing before cutting for hay or grazing the pasture. If grazing is continuous, most seed heads are consumed before the toxin is produced. Unrolling potentially hazardous round bales can leave many of the ergot bodies on the ground, where animals are less likely to eat them.

Fenceline Weaning

By Glenn Selk

Spring calving herds across the Midwest and Southwest will soon be planning to wean the calves. Some producers may wean the calves from young or thin cows during September in order to regain some body condition before winter adds to the nutrient requirements. However, many herds will wean at the more traditional times of late October to early November.

Methods to reduce stress on the calves have become of great interest to producers. Therefore, weaning strategies have been studied in recent years.

California researchers weaned calves with only a fence (Fenceline) separating them from their dams. These were compared to calves weaned totally separate (Separate) from dams. The Separate Calves could not see or hear their dams. Calf behaviors were monitored for five days following weaning. Fenceline calves and cows spent approximately 60% and 40% of their time, respectively within 10 feet of the fence during the first two days. During the first three days, Fenceline calves bawled and walked less, and ate and rested more, but these differences disappeared by the fourth day. All calves were managed together starting 7 days after weaning. After two weeks, Fenceline calves had gained 23 pounds more than Separate calves. This difference persisted since, after 10 weeks, Fenceline calves had gained 110 pounds (1.57 lb/day), compared to 84 pounds (1.20 lb/day) for Separate calves.

There was no report of any differences in sickness, but calves that eat more during the first days after weaning should stay healthier. A follow-up study demonstrated similar advantages of fenceline contact when calves were weaned under drylot conditions and their dams had access to pasture. To wean and background, even for short periods, fenceline weaning should be considered. Source: Price and co-workers. Abstracts 2002 Western Section of American Society of Animal Science.

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