

KIKUYU POISONING

Kikuyu poisoning is a rare disease that can affect dairy cattle, causing rapid illness and death. It appears to be associated with grazing kikuyu pastures that are growing rapidly in autumn following a summer drought.

What to look for

- Usually many animals affected at once
- Sudden death

Animals that are still alive may show:

- Drooling
- 'Sham drinking' (appearing to drink without swallowing any water)
- Sunken eyes (dehydration)
- Reluctance to eat
- Abdominal pain
- Unsteady gait, depression, shaking and going down

Cause

The cause of kikuyu poisoning is not fully understood. It is thought that a fungus growing on the affected kikuyu may be responsible but research to date has been unable to confirm the exact cause. The disease appears to disrupt fluid balance within the body. This results in a large accumulation of fluid in the rumen that cannot be absorbed into the bloodstream, causing severe dehydration. Post-mortem samples often show severe damage to the lining of the rumen.

Animals likely to be affected

All dairy cattle consuming high-risk pastures may be affected. Hungry stock with no access to alternative feed are more likely to be affected.

Confirming the diagnosis

A post-mortem by a veterinarian is required to confirm the diagnosis. The animal's history, a large accumulation of fluid in the rumen and symptoms in surviving animals

are suggestive of the disease. Tissue samples of the rumen as well as samples from the affected pastures can assist the diagnosis.

Treatment

There is no specific treatment for kikuyu poisoning. Supportive treatment may assist affected surviving cattle.

In the event of a suspect case

- Remove cattle from suspect pasture immediately
- Provide alternative low risk feed such as hay or silage
- Contact a veterinarian; post-mortem examination is necessary to confirm the diagnosis and rule out other important causes of sudden death.

Risk factors

- Rapidly growing kikuyu pasture after drought-breaking rain
- Recent history of nitrogenous fertiliser application
- Spelling for several weeks before grazing
- No alternative feed on offer (cattle often avoid the affected pasture if given the option).

Prevention

There are no visible signs on affected kikuyu to indicate that it poses a risk.

It is important to recognise the risk factors and take the following steps if introducing cattle to risky kikuyu:

- Avoid introducing hungry cattle to high risk pasture; allow them to fill up first on an alternative low risk feed
- Provide alternative feed such as hay or silage while grazing or leave the gate open to a low risk pasture
- Observe cattle behaviour; remove them from the paddock if they seem reluctant to eat what looks to be good, high quality pasture
- Spell suspect paddocks for several weeks. The risk is believed to pass after a few weeks.