

Lameness: Easy to see, hard to treat

Elizabeth R. Homerosky, DVM, MSc., DABVP

Lameness is quickly becoming the most significant animal welfare issue in feedlots. In fact, a recent study revealed lame animals accounted for ~37% of all animals housed in feedlot chronic pens. An additional ~11% of chronic pen residents were diagnosed with both lameness and pneumonia. In some feedlots, as much as half of all euthanized animals were the result of non-responsive lameness. The total estimated cost associated with an animal requiring one single treatment for lameness ranged from ~\$110 to \$143. VAHS participated in these studies, as well as, several others spearheaded by Dr. Karen Schwartzkop-Genswein at Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada. The following is a review of the some of the more common causes of lameness identified in those studies that we diagnose early in the feeding period.

Toe tip necrosis

Lameness caused by toe tip necrosis often affects the hind limbs of “high-headed” or severely stressed cattle by 1-3 weeks on feed. Long hauls or waiting periods on abrasive flooring in auction barns, receiving pens, or handling facilities may contribute to an over-wearing of the tip of the toe (pictured) among stressed cattle pushing to get to the middle of the herd. Manure or mud introduced through this small opening will cause an abscess within the foot (pictured) and eventually result in necrosis of the tip of the toe. At first, there may be no swelling present. Left undetected and untreated, the abscess will result in an ascending infection under the skin called cellulitis. Once swelling has ascended above the level of the dewclaws, treatment may be unrewarding. Pieces of the abscess may also enter the bloodstream and cause pneumonia or other secondary infections throughout the body. We have seen a spike in toe tip necrosis cases already this year and believe it to be caused, in part, by high moisture softening and weakening the hooves of cattle before weaning and/or transport. If you believe you have a case or outbreak of toe tip necrosis and would like more information, please contact VAHS or send a photo to one of the veterinarians.



Digital dermatitis

Digital dermatitis, also termed “hairy heel wart,” is characterized by a strawberry-like lesion on skin on the front or back of the foot (pictured). This highly contagious disease resulting in severe lameness has plagued the dairy industry for years. It is slowly transitioning to our feedlot cattle via the introduction of dairy breeds. A feedlot pen may be contaminated from just a single affected animal. It is critical any suspected cases be isolated in an area that can easily be disinfected until the diagnosis can be confirmed by a veterinarian. Please contact VAHS if you believe you have a case of digital dermatitis or if you will be feeding a large number of dairy cattle and would like to discuss preventive measures such as using a footbath with disinfectant upon induction.



Septic arthritis

Septic arthritis or joint infections can be caused by a number of different bacteria. However, arthritis is often secondary to pneumonia. Cattle with non-responsive chronic pneumonia and arthritis are often suffering from a Mycoplasma infection. Mycoplasma is an extremely small organism that is naturally resistant to almost all antibiotics. Even those that respond to treatment may take weeks to months to fully recover while the joint fuses and stabilizes from scar tissue. Euthanasia should be strongly considered for any animals with multiple joints affected, prolonged non-weight bearing lameness, or significant weight loss as these cases are unlikely to recover. Please contact VAHS if you would like for one of our veterinarians to examine an animal with septic arthritis or assess your chronic pen.

Other causes of lameness

There are many other causes of lameness such as sprains or fractures caused by injuries, sloughing hooves resulting from frostbite or ergot toxicity, and founder, just to name a few. There are even genetic conditions and neurologic diseases that cause abnormal gaits that might appear as a primary lameness at first glance. Lameness is easy to see, but difficult to diagnose and very difficult to treat. VAHS offers specialized training for lameness diagnosis and treatment along with other common feedlot diseases. Please contact the office if you would like to schedule a training session for your crew.