

Facial Eczema (FE)

Facial eczema is caused by a toxin called Sporidesmin, produced by the spores of the fungus growing on the pasture. The fungus tends to grow in the 'dead litter' at the very base of the grass, particularly in warm moist conditions. When ingested by cattle, the Sporidesmin damages the liver and bile ducts. Therefore, the body cannot expel wastes. A common sign of facial eczema is sensitive skin, because of this, cows will develop the characteristic lesions due to the exposed affected skin in direct sunlight. This is the result the build up of chlorophyll in the blood.

Clinical Signs

- Seeking shade, excessive licking of their udder and restlessness
- Drop in milk production
- Exposed unpigmented skin becomes inflamed, thickened or peeling off

In light of this, not all cows show clinical signs when affected by facial eczema, such as liver damage. It is thought that for every clinical case, 10 other cows will be showing subclinical signs.

There is no cure for facial eczema, so prevention is the only way to make sure animals are fully protected. Prevention treatment is to dose animals with the appropriate amount of zinc either via a bolus, feed or water. Spraying pastures with fungicides can also help prevent the spores producing in the pasture. For all this to be effective, preventive measures must be done before the spores are found (usually between January- May when temperatures are above 12C for at least 2-3 nights with high humidity).

Although there is no cure, there are ways to 'recover' clinical signs if immediate action is taken once symptoms are showing, such as;

- Drying off affected cows
- Moving the affected animals into shaded pastures
- Applying zinc cream on the exposed skin/white skin (udder)
- Limit 'hard grazing' to avoid cows from grazing into the dead matter where spores are
- Balanced diet with adequate protein and energy levels

For very sick cows, in addition to the above care;

- A starter drench and a B12 supplementation is effective although veterinary advice should always be considered to relieve pain and discuss long term plans for the animal/s.

When culling cows due to facial eczema there are several processing details that you need to be aware of before sending them off, such as;

- Poor body condition score or emaciated
- Severe skin lesions that are weeping

If any of these are signs are relevant to you then getting a vet out to minimize or eliminate these symptoms before going on the truck will avoid any cows not being accepted the first time around, costing time and money.

We also have up to date spore counts sent out on email and display spore count charts in our clinic. Any further questions please ring the clinic and our staff will be happy to help you.