Coccidiosis

The most common cause of calf scour, after worms, in older calves. Untreated can lead to poor weight gain or death due to dehydration.

• **Cause**

The disease is caused by parasites called protozoa. These are found in all cattle – but at low levels, animals are often not affected and show no symptoms.

Protozoan parasites have a 21-day life cycle. Calves pick up eggs, called oocysts, through licking other calves, dirty bedding or drinking and eating food contaminated with dung. The disease can occur in housed stock or those out at pasture.

Eggs pass through the stomach into the small intestine where they mature, enter the large intestine and invade the lining of the gut wall destroying healthy cells. More eggs (oocysts) are produced by the protozoa, which are then passed out in the dung.

Oocysts are resistant to heat, cold and many disinfectants, so they can survive months or years in the environment until they get picked up, ready to start the life cycle again.

• **Affects what age?**

Weaned calf – typically from three weeks to six months of age and sometimes in stock up to two years old.

Housed stock and calves at grass kept on dirty paddocks, where there has been a build-up of contamination around feed and water troughs, are most likely to become infected. Problem often worse with heavy stocking.

Most calves will carry a low level of coccidia, but problems start when dirty, overcrowded conditions cause a rapid build-up of infection and provide an overwhelming challenge. It may be stress related; extremes of weather or management changes such as weaning, disbudding, castration or changing groups can cause the disease.

• **What are the symptoms?**

Scouring, soiled tail, watery or very loose dung containing blood and mucous (this is the lining of the gut wall). Characteristic straining with tail raised as calf tries to force out blood, mucous and dung.

- Weight loss – major economic impact
- Calves are depressed
- Lose of appetite
- Dehydration
- In up to 95% of cases, no scouring is seen.

These infected calves just don’t grow as quickly as they should.

• **What are the effects?**

- Death can occur in untreated cases due to loss of excess fluid and dehydration.
- Many animals recover but often suffer permanent production losses due to damaged gut lining and a decrease in the absorption of nutrients.
- Full recovery, if it occurs, can take weeks to months.
- The most common cause of calf scour in older calves.
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TREATMENT/PREVENTION/MANAGEMENT

Treatment once clinical signs are seen is less effective because the parasite’s life cycle is almost over and much damage to the gut has occurred. But treating in-contact stock, including those not yet showing any symptoms, should help prevent further outbreaks. Good hygiene will minimise spread of infection.

Top tips for preventing an outbreak of coccidiosis

1. Call your vet to confirm the diagnosis – get samples of scour tested.
2. Isolate scouring calves to prevent spread of infection.
3. Treat all affected calves and in-contact animals to help prevent spread – ask your vet about specific control products to put in the feed or to treat large groups.
4. Therapy such as electrolytes (salts) and oral fluids will help dehydrated calves with scour.
5. Clean and disinfect buildings between every batch of calves. Use an appropriate product recommended by your vet and allow building to dry out after cleaning.
6. Increase the amount of bedding to keep calves cleaner and drier, reducing the level of contamination.
7. Raise troughs to prevent contamination from dung and make sure water troughs do not leak as they create damp areas, which are ideal conditions for the parasite.
8. Rest calf paddocks and make sure calves graze on clean, well-drained pasture. Move any feed and water troughs regularly to avoid build-up of dung and poached areas.
9. Do not cause any additional stress during the outbreak by tasks such as weaning, disbudding or changing rations.
10. Keep different age groups separate.
11. Reduce stocking density.

Deccox (Forum Products) provides an effective protection for calves against the effects of coccidial infection, while still allowing them to develop immunity. After two or three months of preventative treatment, calves will become immune to coccidia and will not normally require any more protection. Deccox can be included in compound feeds or given as a supplementary feed.

Vecoxan (Janssen Animal Health) is a simple oral drench which is typically given as a single dose at the time of maximum risk to both affected and in contact calves. Further information is available on request. Vecoxan contains the licensed medicine diclazuril.

Speak to your vet about control of coccidiosis or the use of Deccox or Vecoxan. A range of management regimes and treatment protocols can be used to minimise the threat of infection and treat disease. Always consult your own vet for information and advice on what is most suitable for your unit.