

Mastitis in beef cattle

Mastitis is inflammation of a cow's udder as a consequence of bacterial infection in one or more quarters of the udder. This condition is commonly thought of as a disease of dairy cattle, however beef cattle can also become affected by mastitis. Mastitis generally manifests as one quarter of a cow's udder being abnormal in size or shape, and then on further examination the affected quarter can be hot and firm, with the milk coming from the affected quarter being bloody and having clots of blood in it. If allowed to progress, mastitis can lead to rupture of the affected quarter, as well as potentially septicaemia and death. As such, if you suspect one of your animals has mastitis (especially if the animal is sick or down) it is important to consult a veterinarian.

Treatment for mastitis entails:

- Systemic antibiotics: Generally penicillin or oxytetracycline are used as first line drugs in targeting mastitis, however trimethoprim can also be used and have good efficacy. Affected animals invariably require multiple doses of antibiotics (daily for 5 days if penicillin is being used, every 3 days if oxytetracycline is used).
- Topical antibiotics: Antibiotic ointments can be instilled into the affected quarter through the teat canal. The most common antibiotics used for this purpose are ampicillin and cloxacillin, and most frequently a combination of the two are used (ampiclox). The affected quarter should be stripped before applying the intramammary antibiotic, and the antibiotic should be applied at least once a day, ideally twice daily.
- Anti-inflammatories: Non-steroidal anti-inflammatories are essential in combatting mastitis in beef cattle, as mastitis is extremely painful and can cause septicaemia. Anti-inflammatories like meloxicam or flunixin have pain-relieving effects and prevent sepsis. More frequently meloxicam is given, as it has a longer duration of action and studies have shown that its use along with antibiotics results in higher cure rates.

Like with most conditions, prevention is always better than cure. In beef cattle mastitis comes about from contamination of the udder from the environment. To avoid the development of mastitis one should aim to be calving down cattle in paddocks with good grass cover and minimise access to dams to prevent mud getting into teat canals.