

Stress and Coccidiosis

We have all heard the same story. These heifers (1 to 6 months old) have coccidiosis. How can this be? I am feeding a coccidiostat. Look, right here (milk replacer tag, calf starter grain bag, TMR ration mixing sheet). See. I am doing things right. They cannot have coccidiosis.

The Impossible Can Happen

It is always a good thing to just check on coccidiostat feeding rates before deciding that the impossible has happened. These are weight:dose additives. Bigger heifers need more coccidiostat. Often the “impossible” is traced back to underfeeding the control drug.

It is always a good thing to just check that all the heifers are consuming the coccidiostat. If it is in milk replacer a calf that has not been drinking may be at risk because of this. If it is in the calf starter a calf that is off feed may be consuming too little drug to do the job. If it is in a TMR fed at a bunk some heifers may not be eating enough TMR. This is especially common when there is not enough bunk space even if the pen is never out of feed.

“Well, I checked all of that stuff and they still have coccidiosis. And, it is bad. Look at all that loose manure. Look at them, they have rough hair coats. Look at those dirty smelly rear ends.” The impossible has happened.

The Impossible Has Happened

The impossible did happen because we overstressed these calves or heifers. Preweaned calves may have been overstressed because we failed to feed enough to meet their needs for maintenance and growth. Or, we fed a poor quality milk replacer. Or, we tried to wean them without be sure they were rumen competent. Or, (fill in the blank).

Transition heifers may have been over stressed because we changed too many things at once. Stacking stressors is a common cause of coccidiosis outbreaks in

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heifers being fed normally adequate amounts of coccidiostat. Changes in feed and housing too often are piled on top of vaccinations and/or overly rough handling.

Overstocking of transition pens may result in uneven consumption of both the TMR and the control drug. When there is too little space for all the animals to eat at one time uneven consumption among transition age heifers is almost certain.

This is especially common where calves are weaned in a lock-step manner by age. Often there is a big size difference among calves in a single pen. The bigger pushy ones bully weaker, shy heifers. Even when there is adequate feed available in at a too-small feed bunk these shy heifers have been dominated so much they hesitate to spend an adequate amount of time eating. These smaller heifers get stressed because they are barely meeting their maintenance needs. They often have subclinical pneumonia as well leading to even more stress.

Prevent the Impossible

Check out the sources of stress for your heifers. A stressed-out heifer is a prime candidate for coccidiosis, either of clinical or subclinical intensity, regardless of your coccidia control program.