



Facial Eczema

Facial Eczema (FE) is a condition affecting cattle, sheep, goats and deer. It has its origin from a fungus called pithomyces which grows on dead litter at the base of rye grass. In warm moist weather, typically between January and April, this fungus produces high amounts of spores containing a toxin called sporidesmin which damages the liver when animals eat the spores.

This liver damage prevents the excretion of a substance called phylloerythrin (naturally in their body from the breakdown of chlorophyll in their food), which then accumulates in the bloodstream. It reacts with certain UV rays from the sun and leads to damaged skin. This is why Facial Eczema often manifests as sunburn (redness and swelling) on the lighter pigmented and exposed parts of animals like their face and even the udder and vulva.

Because of the underlying liver damage animals are also prone to poor growth, lowered production, ill thrift and sometimes even death. These animals are uncomfortable and sometimes jaundiced (the whites of their eyes and gums have a yellow tinge) and they may develop skin infections. They often shake their heads with discomfort and seek shade to find some relief. Some animals that are severely affected might develop permanent liver damage which can affect them each subsequent season.

Prevention of FE is better than cure and one of the best long term strategies is to replace the affected rye grass pastures with strains which don't support the fungus. It is also possible to use fungicides on the pasture but depending on the type, it might not be environmentally friendly to do so.

Another long-term solution for sheep stock is to select breeds which are more resistant to FE and will better tolerate pastures with higher spore counts. Yet another option is to move stock off high count pastures at this time of year.

Where animals are exposed to high spore counts, FE may be prevented by drenching stock with Zinc-oxide (not Zinc-suphate as it is toxic), used according to the manufacturers directions to avoid over dosage. It is wise to start this in January and it is a practice that is acceptable on organic farms.

For affected animals, their infected skin might need anti-biotic therapy, while herbs such as calendula are a soothing option. Dairy cows with teat and udder lesions might need drying off. Remove the affected animals from the pasture, dose them on zinc-oxide and offer them shade as well as hay and water for a few days. Then gradually introduce high quality nutritious feed.

Vitamins and various other nutrients available from supplements and herbs will promote healing and help most animals to regain their appetites as well as help the liver to regenerate. Homeopathic remedies are another useful tool to employ both in the prevention and treatment of FE.

A long term plan for the prevention of FE is ideal as it will add greatly to animals' quality of life, save them from tremendous discomfort and ultimately improve their production.