

Do You Know About Facial Eczema?

The following is a brief explanation of this disease of sheep, cattle, goats, deer, alpacas and llamas. Spore counts in the grass are rising into the danger level now in your area. Prevention (with zinc treatment) is far better than trying to repair damage done to the liver after the event.

Facial eczema generally occurs from January to April, depending on weather conditions. It is a disease of ruminants (horses, pigs, rabbits, guinea pigs and poultry are not affected) caused by a fungus that grows in pasture when the weather is warm and humid. The fungus produces spores, which when eaten damage the liver, making it unable to metabolize food properly. The unfortunate animal becomes sensitive to sunlight and gets a severe painful case of second degree sunburn, along with liver failure. It must be kept off grass, given hay and water and kept out of the sun, in shade or under cover. Some do recover but they will never be the same as the liver is permanently damaged. Prevention is much better, and more humane. On a small block it is always feasible to give preventative treatment for facial eczema. The facial eczema fungus produces spores which can be counted on pasture samples, allowing us to tell if the grass will be harmful if eaten.

Spore counts from test areas around the province are published in the Thursday Farmer section of the Daily News. Counts can vary dramatically from farm to farm and paddock to paddock, so it is best to get your own grass samples tested. Cost is around \$20 per sample. The best time of day to collect samples is in the morning when the grass is still damp with dew. Use scissors to cut off the grass about 1cm above ground level (spores are down in the litter layer of the grass). Cut a small amount from about 6-8 areas in the paddock. Avoid gateways and hedgerows. Sample needs to be about a double handful. Place in a paper bag, and take to your vet clinic to be counted the same day. The paddock you choose to sample is up to you. The information will be most use to you if you sample the next paddock the animals are going into. For small numbers of animals, the most effective protection from facial eczema is zinc bullets, sold as "Time Capsules". Each animal is given a bullet by mouth with a special drenching gun, and is then protected from facial eczema for 4 weeks (cattle) and 6 weeks (sheep). NP Vet group will lend you the dosing gun when you purchase the capsules from the clinic. You will need a yard with a race to administer the capsules, and if you haven't done it before, I would strongly recommend getting someone experienced to show you how, as damage can be done. If you haven't got any yards then this is a really good time to build some!! For goats, deer, llamas and alpacas zinc can be given by dusting on pasture, by drenching, or by adding to the water. Your vet will have dose rates for you, and you should discuss your individual requirements with them. Llamas and alpacas are especially sensitive to facial eczema, and if the spore counts are high, it may be best to keep them in stables and feed hay, with no access to fresh grass at all. Meal (pellets) is available with added zinc for prevention of facial eczema, also.

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