



Grass-Fed Beef Initiative Extension Series

Fact Sheet 6 of 11

Cattle Health for Grass-Fed Herds in Nova Scotia

A holistic approach towards herd health is a logical step for grass-fed beef producers. In applying a holistic philosophy on animal health, farmers place greater emphasis on prevention than cure and look for causal-based solutions rather than treating symptoms.

Cow Signals

By paying close attention to their cattle, farmers begin to understand how cattle behaviour relates to health and may be able to intervene before an illness appears. Here are some signs to look for:

- Hindered mobility
- Posture (may indicate lameness or pain)
- Anxiety and restlessness
- Coughing/runny nose
- Body condition (too thin or too fat)
- Coat (thinning, dull, rough)
- Separated from the herd
- Not chewing its cud (signals pain, digestive problem, fever)
- Lack of interest in its surroundings
- Manure (amount, consistency, frequency)
- Urination (amount, frequency)

You can learn a lot about herd health by making daily observations about cattle behaviour.



Biosecurity

One of the most effective ways to keep contagious diseases off your farm is to keep a closed herd. Avoid bringing in new cattle unless you are sure they are disease-free.

If you purchase new animals, keep them isolated for two weeks to make sure they are not incubating a disease. Remember that cattle are social animals, so never isolate just one animal.

Nutrition and Water

Managing a robust, resilient, nutrient dense pasture with diverse grasses and legumes is the foundation for maintaining a healthy herd. Poor nutrition is the underlying cause of diseases such as scours, respiratory illnesses, and foot rot.

Even if you diligently vaccinate cattle, they may still get sick if they are malnourished or have a mineral deficiency. Trace mineral deficiencies can be corrected by using supplements (e.g., kelp, mineral premix, trace mineral salt or given to each animal orally or by injection).

Always provide adequate sources of clean water. Dirty water may spread disease and may limit consumption. Cattle should not have to travel more than 800 ft (245 m) to access water.

Vaccination

Vaccination is one of the tools to keep livestock healthy and potentially eliminate the need for antibiotic treatments. Develop an appropriate vaccination schedule for your herd based on the most prevalent or devastating diseases in your region.

Sanitation

Prevent disease outbreaks by frequently removing manure and old bedding in pens or barns and disinfecting contaminated barns, stalls, calf hutches, or other buildings where sick animals have been.

Parasite Control

Lower weaning weights in calves, less milk production, less efficient immune system, and lower reproduction rates are some of the more “silent” symptoms of parasites.

External parasites such as flies, mosquitoes, and ticks carry disease and steal an animal’s nutrients by sucking blood. Natural solutions such as back rubbers or dusters can be effective. Internal parasites have co-evolved with cattle, but when out of balance they rob nutrients and may lower resistance to disease.

Cattle continually grazing near where they defecate can pick up worm larvae that have hatched from eggs passed in manure. Rotating cattle away from fresh manure or having other species (e.g., poultry) may reduce parasite load in the pasture.

In a holistic approach, dewormers (parasiticides) should only be used in an emergency.

Avoiding Stress

If we take human health as a point of reference for cattle health, disease or sickness in humans often appears at or immediately after times of stress. Human illness can often be associated with the stresses arising from poor nutrition, lack of sleep, inadequate exercise, inability to express our natural behaviours, etc. In the natural life cycle of cattle, there are times when stress is more prevalent and the immune system may be compromised. At these times, farmers need to heighten nutrition and look for ways to minimize other stresses.

In a hot climate, pastures with shade or shade roofs tall enough to allow good air movement above the cattle help reduce heat stress. Winter pastures require windbreaks (e.g., trees or a solid fence).

Psychological stress occurs when cattle are over-crowded, weaned, disrupted in normal social interactions, or suffer fear and anxiety during improper handling.

A common stress is human handling — moving, sorting, vaccinating, branding, dehorning, tagging, castrating, weaning, transporting, etc. Avoid doubling up on stresses at the same time.

Natural Behaviour

Cattle are social animals and when given the opportunity (space and numbers) they will establish a hierarchy of dominance, which helps reduce stress throughout the herd. All animals require exercise to help maintain muscle structure and to stimulate lymphatic circulation, which is critical for a healthy immune system.

Cattle finished on pastures have the additional benefit of having access to sunshine which helps regulate the nervous and hormonal system.



For more information

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