Ergot Issues in Pastures

Update from Jaymelynn Farney, KSRE Beef Systems Specialist

Ergot toxicity in cattle has been found this year, as climatic conditions were optimal for ergot alkaloid toxin being produced from fungus growing in the seed head of many grasses. Optimal climatic conditions for ergot development include a cool, wet spring, followed by hot summer temperatures and, in instances of haying, delayed harvest due to rains.

Why is ergot a concern? All animals can be affected by ergot, but cattle are most susceptible. The ergot toxin causes vasoconstriction of blood vessels, primarily small arteries. The extremities are most commonly affected, causing a loss of the tips of ears and tails. Other symptoms include feet and leg swelling, lameness in the fetlocks and hock joints and, in severe cases, loss of hooves. Cattle affected by ergot toxicity generally develop heat intolerance and a rough hair coat, lose weight and spend a greater amount of time standing in water or under shade. What grasses can have the fungus? In eastern Kansas, fescue is well-known for causing ergot issues. However, other grasses, including brome, timothy, western and intermediate wheatgrass, can host the fungus as well. Rye, wheat, barley and oats also can support growth of the fungus.

How do I identify the ergot fungus? The fungus can be seen in the seed head and can be identified as dark brown, purple or black bodies.

How do I manage ergot? If cattle begin showing signs of ergot toxicity, removing the animals from the infected pasture or hay can result in a full recovery if removed early enough. Because the seed head is where the fungus is located, cattle can be allowed to graze susceptible pastures before it emerges or the seed heads can be clipped prior to allowing cattle to graze. Hay produced from ergot-infected grass can be toxic, so inspect seed heads prior to feeding purchased hay. If putting up your own hay, remove seed heads prior to harvesting.

One positive about the fungus is it is primarily affected by climate, so pastures are not persistently infected. Keeping an eye on susceptible grasses and grains before and during grazing and prior to harvest will help manage for toxicity.

Additional Information:
Ergot Poisoning in Cattle - Iowa State University
Ergot Poisoning in Cattle - University of Nebraska-Lincoln

(Ergot in Wheatgrass)

(Ergot in Brome)

(Ergot in Brome)

(Lesions from Ergot)