



Cattle Producer's Handbook

Animal Health Section

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Sudden Death in Feeder Cattle

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Sudden Death Syndrome is a term commonly used to describe situations in which feeder cattle are found dead or are seen dying suddenly. Unfortunately, however, it is an inaccurate and nondiagnostic catch-all designation for any disease that causes unexplained sudden death. Diseases responsible for sudden deaths range from those that are expected to cause sudden death to those that are likely to produce observable illness of several days, but that are missed when the cattle first become sick. The following are common diseases that fall into the Sudden Death Syndrome category.

Diseases that are expected to cause sudden death:

- Blackleg
- Bloat
- Enterotoxemia
- Malignant edema
- Fatal hemorrhage (rupture of large blood vessels)
- Perforated stomach ulcer
- Injuries
- Lightning
- Anthrax
- Anaphylaxis

Diseases that are not expected to cause sudden death, but that are missed when cattle become sick:

- Infectious bovine rhinotracheitis (IBR)

- Acute pneumonia, especially bovine respiratory disease (BRD)
- Feed sickness (acidosis)
- TEME (brainers)
- Calf diphtheria
- Water belly

Probably the most commonly found cause of sudden death is acute pneumonia, particularly the shipping fever complex. Although cattle with acute pneumonia seldom die suddenly, they can easily be overlooked when they first become ill. Except for bloat and enterotoxemia, these diseases can be tentatively diagnosed by postmortem examination of a freshly dead animal. However, if an animal has been dead longer than 6 to 8 hours, the disease changes are often obscured by tissue decomposition.

Whenever a sudden death problem occurs, a postmortem examination should be conducted by a veterinarian as quickly as possible before tissue decomposition becomes extreme. In the majority of cases, a tentative diagnosis can be established and appropriate preventive measures can be started. Since many sudden deaths are caused by diseases that are expected to produce illness for several days, the cattle should be observed frequently for the occurrence of additional cases that can be treated.

