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Questions and Answers: Bovine Tuberculosis Signs and Symptoms

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APHIS Factsheet

Veterinary Services September 2008

Questions and Answers: Bovine Tuberculosis Signs and Symptoms

Q. What is bovine tuberculosis (TB)?
A. TB is a contagious chronic bacterial disease that often doesn't show signs until it has reached an advanced stage.

Q. What animals and species can it affect?
A. Bovine TB primarily affects cattle, but it can be transmitted to any warm-blooded animal. In certain conditions, bovine TB can affect humans.

Q. What are the symptoms of TB?
A. TB is difficult to diagnose with clinical signs alone. In the early stages of TB, clinical signs are not visible. In later stages, clinical signs may include: emaciation, lethargy, weakness, anorexia, low-grade fever, and pneumonia with a chronic, moist cough. Lymph node enlargement may also be present.

Q. What should I do if my animals show these symptoms?
A. If you suspect TB in your herd, you should isolate the animal immediately and then call your veterinarian for a proper diagnosis.

Q. How does TB get into cattle herds?
A. TB can be passed to a herd by infected cattle, cervids, swine, and humans. It is spread through the respiration of TB bacteria aerosols, through feed or watering sites contaminated with saliva and other discharges, or by drinking raw, unpasteurized milk from infected animals. The risk of exposure is greatest in enclosed areas, such as barns with poor ventilation.

Q. Are dairies more susceptible to TB?
A. The layout and activities of a dairy operation offer a greater chance for exposure to TB than a beef operation. Dairy cows spend more time in enclosed areas or in crowded conditions, where there is a higher risk of exposure. Unpasteurized milk, which is a main source of nourishment for calves, can also spread the disease.

Bovine TB Testing

Q. How does APHIS test for TB?
A. APHIS uses several methods to test for TB. The main method of testing is a tuberculin test, where the animal is exposed to tuberculin and checked for a reaction 72 hours later. There is also a nationwide surveillance program in slaughter plants. If lesions consistent with TB appear on a carcass, a sample is sent to APHIS' National Veterinary Services Laboratories for confirmation.

Q. How many animals in the United States are tested for TB each year?
A. More than 1 million animals are tested annually.

Q. Typically, when are animals tested for TB?
A. Animals are tested if they are:

- Suspected of having TB
- Part of an epidemiological investigation, such as a TB trace from an affected herd
- Required to for participation in a show or exhibition
- Required to for a change of ownership
- Preparing for interstate movement
- Part of surveillance activities at slaughter

Wildlife and TB

Q. Does wildlife spread TB to commercial cattle?
A. Yes. Wildlife and cattle with TB can pass the infection to each other under certain circumstances.

Q. What is the risk of TB transmission from local wildlife?
A. Deer that have direct contact with cattle could pose a risk of transmitting TB. The risk of transmitting TB is greatest in enclosed areas, such as barns; however, livestock can become infected if they share common watering or feeding places contaminated with saliva and other discharges from infected deer, feral swine, or other animals.

Avoid keeping livestock in the same enclosure as wildlife. Try to keep wildlife away from outdoor watering containers, such as troughs and pools.

Q. How is TB being managed in wildlife?
A. There are several methods in use to help manage TB in wildlife. In some areas, the overall population of wild deer herds is being reduced to more natural levels. Wildlife officials also use a trap and test method in which infected deer are euthanized and uninfected deer are released.

Q. How can I find out if the wildlife in my area has TB?
A. Contact your State's game and fish commission, or department of natural resources.

Q. What steps can I take to keep my cattle safe from TB in wildlife?
A. Always practice good biosecurity and avoid keeping livestock in the same enclosure as wildlife. Try to keep wildlife away from outdoor watering containers. Additionally, store your animal feed in areas that wildlife cannot access. Should wildlife get into stored feed, discard that feed immediately and do not feed it to your cattle.

Additional Information
For more information on bovine tuberculosis, please visit the APHIS Web site at www.aphis.usda.gov. Click on "Hot Issues" and then "Bovine Tuberculosis."

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