

PARASITE MANAGEMENT AT GRASS

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Parasite control at grazing

As temperatures rise, we are once again entering the season when stomach and gut worms become a problem on farms. These worms thrive in warm, damp conditions, and during the summer, their life cycles can be completed in just 3-4 weeks. Worms produce a large number of eggs and a small worm burden can quickly turn into a big issue, causing scour and poor growth in livestock. While we can expect stomach and gut worm problems to increase during the grazing season, lungworm outbreaks are less predictable. It is important to closely watch animals, especially those in their first grazing season, for any signs of coughing. If lungworm is suspected, treat the group immediately.

Monitoring and treating calves


Spring-born suckler calves typically don't need treatment for stomach or gut worms until around weaning when they start eating more grass. However, dairy-beef calves and autumn-born sucklers should be routinely checked and treated if needed throughout the grazing season. Worm egg counts from 6-8 weeks after turnout can help determine when these calves might need treatments. Early in the season the worm levels are usually low but egg counts above 200 egg along with poor daily live weight gains can indicate a risk of clinical disease.

Additionally, coccidia infection can be an issue for calves early in the grazing season. A dung sample can help differentiate between coccidia and gut worm problems, as they require different treatments. Speak to your veterinarian on the best treatment approaches.

Pasture management to reduce the need for wormer treatments

One of the most effective ways to manage the worm burden on the farm is through pasture management. Pastures that have been grazed by calves in the previous season, particularly in the autumn, are likely to be more contaminated. Grazing autumn-born or dairy-beef calves should be avoided on these high-risk pastures because they are more likely to develop clinical signs after picking up severe worm infections. Instead, let adult animals, sheep, or second-season grazers use these pastures. These animals have some immunity to the worms, or in the case of sheep, they usually aren't affected by the same stomach and gut worms as cattle. Adult cattle rarely show signs of stomach or gut worms, but lungworm can still be a problem if they graze on heavily contaminated pastures or haven't developed strong immunity to lungworm.

It might be useful to map out which fields you consider low, medium or high risk for worm egg contamination for the current season to help with planning the grazing patterns (Figure). Was there a lungworm outbreak recently or in autumn last year? Were these areas grazed by young stock last year or earlier in the year? Is there a reseeded paddock that can be used for young stock? Are the fields waterlogged and a risk for liver fluke or can those areas be avoided with a temporary fence? Is there an option to use leader-follower grazing with other livestock species or different age groups? Is it late in the grazing season when worm burden will be higher? Has it been a very dry summer where worm larvae are less likely to survive in the fields? These types of questions can help identify the suspected risk on the fields of contamination with worm eggs and larvae over the course of the grazing season. Animals might not need a wormer treatment when grazing on low-risk pastures. Practical decisions such as the amount of grass available, watering points, silage fields etc. all need to be considered in the planning alongside the parasite risk.



Mapping out the suspected risk of contamination of worm eggs and larvae might be useful for grazing planning. (Red: high risk, orange: medium risk, green: low risk fields)

Plan ahead for parasites

A comprehensive parasite control plan can help prevent production losses due to worms before any obvious clinical signs appear. Controlling parasites is complex and needs to be tailored to each farm. For this reason, a parasite control plan should consider factors like the type of parasites present, weather, testing, grazing and overall farm management. It should also be adjusted as the weather changes, for example, in very dry summers the risk is lower. The prolonged rains and mild temperatures over the last seasons might mean that larvae are more likely to have survived on pastures and extra care needs to be taken against worms this summer.

