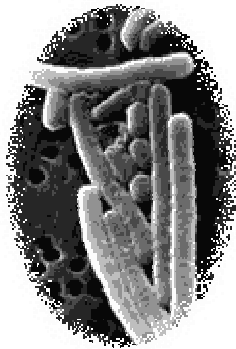




Anthrax: Fast and Deadly Killer



Anthrax under a microscope Courtesy Center for Disease Control

Anthrax may not be considered the No. 1 bioterrorist threat in the industry, but it is one of the deadliest cattle diseases known to veterinary medicine. Anthrax, however, is not contagious.

Aside from the slight possibility of contracting the disease through the criminal spreading of the bacteria, cattle can get anthrax from drinking water from shallow ponds during a drought, grazing following a drought, being on recently disturbed or excavated ground, especially where anthrax previously occurred, and being housed in locations where anthrax was previously reported, according to John Kirk, a veterinarian with the University of California, Davis.

Anthrax spores can live for decades, Kirk says, and cattle exposed to anthrax can die within hours of exposure. Infected animals typically show signs of fever, go off feed, initially become excited but then lapse into a depressed state, have difficulty breathing, and exhibit uncoordinated movements. Kirk says that within just a few hours, the animals go into convulsions and die.

Kirk notes that dead animals also have distinctive signs, including bloody discharges from all body openings, rapid decomposition, excessive edema, and a slow setting in of rigor mortis.

When handling a suspected anthrax case, Kirk recommends calling a vet, not opening the carcass, thoroughly washing and disinfecting hands and footwear, discarding clothing in a plastic bag, and contacting authorities for advice on disposal and site decontamination.

Anthrax spores can lay dormant in soil for years, Kirk says, but then reverts to an active state when eaten or inhaled, or can enter the body through a skin wound. The vegetative form of anthrax reproduces in the host animal, he says, and then is either destroyed within an unopened carcass or reverts to spores when exposed to the air.

Anthrax in cattle, sheep, and goats has been diagnosed in most states, with most cases occurring in the Mississippi River Valley. Kirk says that veterinarians in areas that have anthrax probably have easy access to vaccines, but those in other areas likely do not.

Source: Dairy Profit Weekly, Oct. 22, 2001.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES:

Anthrax: What is It?

www.news.wisc.edu/anthrax

Anthrax-Special Issue

www.fass.org/dasees/animalhealth/anthrax.asp