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Keeping Steers Healthy



The success of any livestock operation depends on the health of the animals. Healthy, well-managed beef cattle will grow and produce efficiently. Disease in a beef herd can be costly, and can quickly destroy a herd.

Objectives

After studying the materials and completing the suggested activities for this section, you should be able to:

1. Identify signs of a healthy steer.
2. List four or more symptoms of a sick steer.
3. List ways to keep a steer healthy.
4. Name the three main things that make steers sick.
5. Show and tell how to use a veterinary thermometer.

How Steers Digest Food

Perhaps you've heard that cows and sheep have four stomachs. Well, they do in a way. Actually, they have a stomach with four compartments. The first compartment is called the rumen. Here, tiny bacteria break down forages like grass and hay. This gives cows and sheep the ability to eat and digest forages. It is why we call cows and sheep "ruminants." The second compartment is called the reticulum. It is partially connected to the rumen. Often "hardware" such as nails or wire the animal accidentally eats settle out in the reticulum.

The omasum is the third compartment. Here, a large amount of water is absorbed. The fourth

compartment is called the abomasum, and it is nearly like the stomach of nonruminants.

In addition to their four-part stomach, steers have a small intestine, a large intestine, and a liver to help digest their food. Their hearts pump blood to all parts of their body, and steers breathe with their lungs. These internal parts of a steer's body are very important. They all must work properly in order for the steer to be healthy. If your steer is not healthy, the organs and body systems will not function properly, and your steer will not grow.

What Makes Steers Sick

Knowing a steer's normal body temperature is important because the body temperature goes up if the steer gets sick. A high temperature is a sure sign that your steer is not feeling well. The normal body temperature for people is 98.6°F. The normal body temperature for steers is 101.5°F. However, if a steer's temperature is between 100.5°F and 103.0°F, it is normal. Temperatures over 104.0°F indicate a sick calf. If you call a veterinarian when your steer acts sick, he or she may ask for your steer's temperature.

You should learn to use a livestock thermometer to take your steer's temperature. Use one that has a loop on the end. Tie a string through

the loop so the thermometer will not be easy to “lose” inside the steer. Put a clip on the other end of the string so you can clip the string to the hair on the steer’s rump. To take the steer’s temperature, place the thermometer into the steer’s rectum and leave it there about three minutes before taking it out and reading it.

A healthy steer will eat when it is offered grain, either once or twice a day. If your steer is not eating or drinking, it may be sick. There are three main ways that steers can get sick. First, steers get **diarrhea**. This affects the digestive system. Runny feces with a strong smell is characteristic of diarrhea. It is very important to realize that the organisms that cause loose manure are contained in the diarrhea, so it is necessary to keep the pen clean. Dirty pens and equipment, contaminated water, dirty feed troughs, and sick animals themselves can spread bacteria and germs that cause disease.

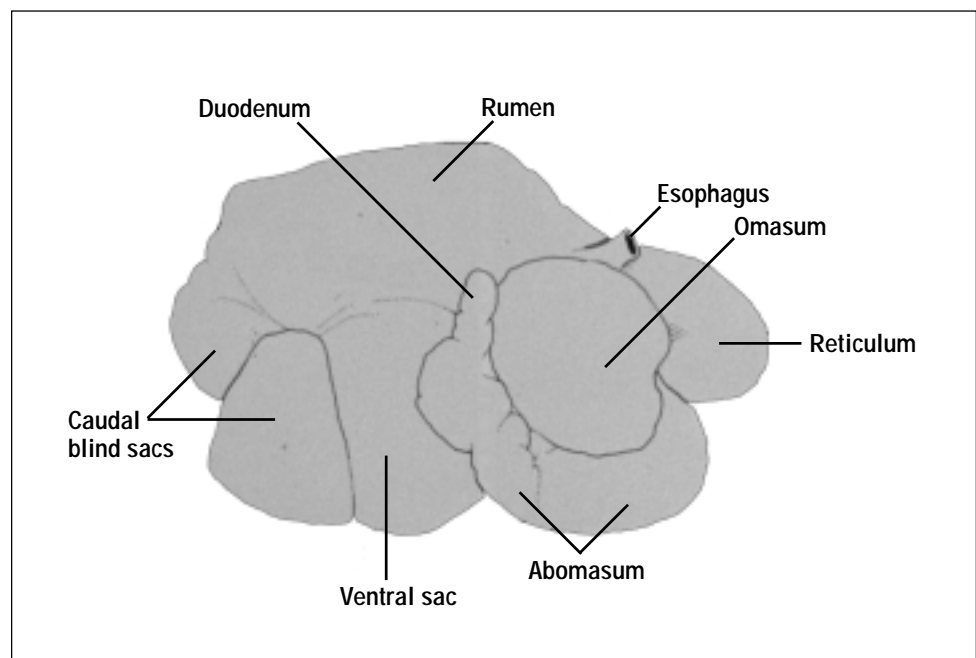
Coccidiosis sometimes causes steers to get diarrhea. Coccidia are actually tiny parasites found in the intestines of infected cattle. Steers can be fed ionophores (such as Rumensin or Bovatec) or coccidiostats to prevent coccidiosis.

Steers with diarrhea can dehydrate very quickly. If you notice that your steer has diarrhea, get help from an adult and try to remember when the diarrhea started.

The second major health problem involves **respiratory diseases**, those related to the steer’s breathing. Respiratory disease affects the lungs, throat, and nose. The easiest way to know if your steer has such problems is by hearing it cough or have trouble breathing. You may also notice mucous hanging from your calf’s nose. Stress caused by trucking, poor ventilation, or changeable weather can all trigger respiratory disease.

Respiratory disease caused by the stress of trucking your steer home usually occurs within two weeks after arrival. Be especially observant for signs of respiratory disease during this period. This type of respiratory disease is commonly known as “shipping fever,” which is neither a fever nor always associated with shipping of cattle. Germs that cause respiratory diseases can be carried through the air or picked up through nose-to-nose contact. Again, if you see any of these problems, ask your parent or leader for help.

THE RUMEN



To help prevent respiratory disease, your steer should be vaccinated for IBR, BVD, PI3, BRSV, *H. somnus*, and *Pasturella*. Your calf may have been vaccinated before you brought it home. If so, find out if it was vaccinated with a killed or modified-live vaccine. If your calf had only one dose of a killed vaccine, it will need a booster shot. If your calf has had no vaccinations, you can use a single dose of modified-live vaccine. See Appendix 2 for more information about respiratory diseases.

Another health problem for steers is caused by **internal and external parasites**. Parasites affect the digestive system or the skin. **Worms** are the main kinds of internal parasites. There are many different types of worms: they come in varying shapes and sizes. Some are visible only through a microscope, while others are large and look like spaghetti. Although worms rarely kill steers, they can severely reduce a calf's growth rate and cause it to lose body condition or have a rough hair coat. Worms consume feed nutrients that steers should be using to grow. Sometimes you may not know that your steer has internal parasites. Talk to your veterinarian or leader about a routine worming program for your market steer. Plan to worm your steer as soon as you get it home and again in the spring.

Another internal parasite is commonly known as **cattle grubs or warbles**. These are the larvae of the heel fly. They develop under the hide, causing a raised lump usually on the back. The larvae eventually hatch out and fall to the ground to complete their life cycle. The best treatment for cattle grubs is good prevention with products such as ivermectin (Ivomec) or Dectomax, administered in early fall. Neither product should be given to cattle during the winter months. Grubs are best treated before they are big enough to be noticed under the hide.

Lice and ticks are the two kinds of external parasites that can affect steers. The main thing these parasites do is drink the steer's blood, which can make your steer weak. If you notice hair loss on your steer's neck and twist, or see

your steer rubbing itself on a gate or post, these may be signs that your steer has external parasites. Several treatments are available for ticks and lice. Ask your parent or leader for help if you spot either of these pests.

Foot rot is a disease caused by bacteria invading the soft tissue of the hoof. It causes tissue decay and smells very bad. Steers usually develop a limp and swelling above the hoof. Foot rot can be treated with antibiotics or a topical treatment as recommended by a veterinarian. Overgrown hooves also can cause steers to limp. Generally, one hoof trimming several weeks before the fair or roundup is sufficient to keep overgrown hooves from becoming a problem.

Ringworm is a fungus that sometimes infects cattle housed indoors in the wintertime. If your calf gets ringworm, you will notice hair loss in circular patches anywhere on the body. It is important to detect and begin treating ringworm early. Ringworm can be cured by routine fungicide treatments. Always use gloves to treat ringworm because it is contagious to humans. If you think your steer has ringworm, consult your leader or veterinarian for appropriate treatments.

Warts routinely affect cattle. Cattle can be vaccinated for the virus that causes warts if they are a serious problem. When warts appear, they can be easily removed with a sharp knife—or sometimes even pulled off with your hands.

Pinkeye is a bacterial infection of the eyeball, usually caused by some irritation such as face flies. Cattle with pinkeye have watery eyes and have difficulty keeping their eyes open. Pinkeye can be treated by applying antibiotic powder directly to the affected eye. A vaccine for pinkeye is available. If left untreated, pinkeye can cause your steer to go blind. If you think your steer has pinkeye, let your parent or leader know.

In addition to the health problems listed above, steers can get many other diseases. They may be contagious and passed from steer to steer and from herd to herd. Therefore, to maintain "biosecurity" (a disease-free environment), you should do the following:

- Isolate new animals for at least 14 days after bringing them home.
- Place a foot bath with disinfectant at the entrance to your barn, or wear disposable boots.
- Avoid wearing the same clothes from farm to farm.

The most important thing to do to keep your steer healthy is to keep the steer and its pen clean. Also, make sure the steer is well fed, comfortable, and eating and drinking normally. Get help from an adult if you think your steer is sick.

Words You Should Know

Ruminant: An animal such as a steer that has a stomach with multiple compartments allowing it to digest forages.

Parasite: A living being that lives and gets its food in or on another living being called a host.

External parasites: Parasites, such as lice and mange, that cause problems on the outside of the steer.

Internal parasites: Parasites, such as worms, that cause problems on the inside of the steer.

Biosecurity: Practices to keep your steers from catching diseases from other steers, people, or the environment.

Suggested Activities

- Name the three main things that cause steers to get sick.
- Describe at least four signs to look for to recognize a sick steer.
- Show or tell the proper way to use a livestock thermometer to measure a steer's temperature.
- Keep a journal or barn chart about your steer's health.
- Find out what veterinary examinations and documents are needed to show a steer at a state show, such as the Pennsylvania Farm Show.

Extra Activities to Try

- Observe your steer's behavior to see if it is eating, drinking, and breathing properly.
- Observe your steer's urine and feces to see if they look normal.
- Have your parent or project leader check to see if the ventilation in your steer's pen is okay.
- Check your steer for ringworm and warts.
- Visit a local veterinarian. Ask to see internal parasites under a microscope.
- Travel with a veterinarian and watch him or her examine a sick calf.
- Deworm your steer shortly after you buy it (if it was not wormed previously), and again in the spring if it has access to an outside lot.
- Set up a health plan for your herd.

Ideas for Presentations and Speeches

- The normal steer.
- Health problems steers can have.
- How to keep my steer healthy and happy.
- Parasites and how to control them.
- Biosecurity practices.

Things to Talk About

- What steps should you take to keep your steer healthy?
- What should you do if your steer gets sick?
- What are the three main health problems steers can have?
- How does a healthy steer act?