



Farm Vet News

Endell Farm Vets Blog

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'Dwarf Calves'



Image 1: Dwarf calf with stunted legs, joint laxity and a domed head

A recent report by the SRUC suggests that a higher than typical number of 'dwarf calves' have been born this spring. Our vets have seen several cases of this condition, known as 'Congenital Chondrodystrophy and Joint Laxity' on their rounds in the last few months.

It has been recognised in the UK for over 20 years with similar issues being seen around the world. It is most often associated with certain regions of Scotland and less commonly reported in England and Wales. Interestingly, some years appear to be worse than others in terms of number of cases seen.

This blog post will discuss typical clinical presentations and risk factors to avoid for this condition which too often deprives valuable calves of their good health and vigour.

The precise cause of this condition is not yet known.

There are, however, several known risk factors which should be avoided.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR THE CALF?

Diagnoses are often made on clinical signs alone as testing live calves is generally unrewarding. Post mortem examination and laboratory assessment of long bones may help define the condition and identify possible causes. Many affected calves will go on to lead productive lives. While the joint laxity may resolve over time the bone changes will not, so calves will always appear stunted. Unfortunately, not all of these calves will be compatible with life and euthanasia is recommended on welfare grounds, particularly where they cannot stand and suckle alone.

CLINICAL PRESENTATIONS

This condition can present in a variety of ways. Those most commonly reported include:

- Dwarfism with shortening of the long bones (particularly the upper portion of the legs)
- Joints towards the top of the leg may have restricted movement
- Joints towards the bottom of the leg may have increased movement/laxity which gives them a bendy appearance
- Domed heads and shortened jaws
- Stillbirths, non-viable calves, or calves that fail to stand
- Some calves within a group may be badly affected while others are only mildly affected or normal
- Mainly seen in single suckled spring born calves

KNOWN RISK FACTORS

Investigation of a specific cause can often be unrewarding as the issue may have occurred several months before the condition is recognised at calving.

The following factors have been shown to be associated with outbreaks of this condition:

- Forage only feeding; particularly when grass silage accounts for the full ration but can be seen with other forages. Annual variability in silage quality may explain why some years or farms are worse affected than others
- Feeding "risky" forage in the middle of pregnancy, i.e. during winter housing of spring calving cows
- Manganese deficiency, which may be due to a lack of manganese in the forage but is more likely due to other compounds in the silage antagonising the manganese and making it unavailable
- Feeding mouldy silage
- Drought reducing quality and quantity of forage