

Showing No Signs, Dairy Herd Can Have Johne's Disease

ANDY ANDREWS
Lancaster Farming Staff
LANCASTER (Lancaster Co.)
— A large portion of a dairy herd's stock can be infected with the bacterium that causes Johne's disease without any signs of infection.

Also, Johne's disease can cost producers a great deal of money in lost production, according to experts who spoke on Tuesday during part two of the Lancaster County Dairy Days.

About 250 dairy farmers and industry representatives were provided with information on how to

detect and prevent Johne's disease, in addition to a new certification program designed to eliminate the disease from replacement herds.

According to Dr. Ray Sweeney, VMD from the New Bolton School of Veterinary Medicine, Johne's disease affects the lower small intestine of dairy and beef cattle, but it can also affect sheep and goats. The organism which causes the disease is called *M. paratuberculosis*.

Animals showing clinical signs of infection exhibit weight loss and diarrhea. The cattle cannot make

use of feed nutrients and can show extreme weight loss and "bottle jaw." The animal's small intestine thickens up, which keeps the animal from utilizing nutrients.

The real problem lies in detecting it, according to Sweeney. Often, the bacterium can be present on the farm, even with normal-looking animals. But the incubation period, the time for animals to develop symptoms, can take up to 2-3 years or "even longer," he said.

In many cases, the disease is brought to the farm by an animal

purchased outside and not checked for the disease.

The bacterium is spread in manure. For Johne's to be stopped, the manure must be handled in such a way to prevent the younger stock from getting infected — calves are most at risk for picking up the bacterium.

In studies, a heavy shedder — an animal that sheds a great deal of the bacterium in manure — can produce up to 3 billion organisms a day, the equivalent to all the blades of grass in a 40-acre field. Animals who are near heavy shedders are susceptible at any age to picking up the disease.

Also, according to Sweeney, the bacterium can last for a long time in the environment. The organism survives freezing temperatures.

The problems can multiply if left unchecked. Once dealt with, the contamination can be very persistent.

The only sure way to detect the presence of the bacterium is to test for it through a combination of blood and fecal samples.

For dairy producers to reduce the risk of contamination, they should know where their source replacement animals come from, and make sure the replacement

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