



Bovine Brucellosis

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Bovine brucellosis is a contagious disease of livestock which can also infect people. The disease is known as “contagious abortion” or “Bang’s disease” in livestock and as “undulant fever” in people because of the intermittent fevers accompanying the infection. It is a serious disease that has been eradicated from most livestock in the United States (U.S.). The only remaining reservoir of infection is in elk and bison in the Greater Yellowstone Area, with occasional spill-over of infection into livestock.

Incubation

The incubation period in cattle ranges from two weeks to several months or longer depending on their reproductive status when infected. Cattle can be infected as calves but may not show signs of infection until they abort as mature cows. Some cattle can become carriers, shedding the bacteria but showing no signs of illness.

Signs in Cattle

The most obvious signs in pregnant cattle include abortion, birth of weak calves, and vaginal discharge. Not all infected cows abort, but those that do usually abort between the fifth and seventh month of gestation. Even though their calves can appear healthy, infected cows continue to harbor and discharge infectious organisms in milk and uterine secretions for life. Other signs include retained placentas, uterine infections, low conception rates, and reduced milk yields in cows, and orchitis in bulls.



Human Health

People infected with the bacteria that causes bovine brucellosis can develop fatigue, headaches, high fever, chills, joint pain, backache, and orchitis (in males). These symptoms may persist for several weeks or more. Complications, such as meningitis, can occur. Eating raw dairy products and imported soft cheeses made from unpasteurized milk are the main source of human infection.

There is no danger from eating cooked products because normal cooking temperatures kill the disease-causing bacteria. Contact with reproductive discharges from infected animals can also spread the disease to workers. Rubber or plastic gloves should be worn when assisting calving or aborting cows and when disposing of placentas or aborted fetuses. Washing hands with soap and water after working with livestock is always recommended.



Prevention

California laws allow female cattle to be vaccinated against brucellosis between 4 and 12 months of age. All female dairy cattle 4 months of age and older, and all female beef cattle over 12 months of age, must be vaccinated for change of ownership or can only be sold directly for slaughter or to an approved feedlot for feeding to slaughter. Spayed heifers, steers, and bulls are exempt from this regulation.

Human disease can be prevented by consuming only pasteurized dairy products and by workers using good sanitation and management practices.

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