
Reaction to adder bites varies widely

Snake bites are relatively common, but some cattle show little reaction while others become very ill, as **Rachael Porter** discovers

Adder bites are rarely fatal, but prompt treatment is vital. That's the message from specialist dairy vet Chris Luckhurst, from the Cornwall-based XL Vet's Calweton Veterinary Group.

He sees many snake bites among his clients' herds – typically between February and October with a summer peak.

“Some cattle show little reaction to a bite from an adder, which is the only venomous snake that is native to the UK. Meanwhile others become extremely ill. It depends on the individual animal, where she's been bitten and how much venom was injected,” he explains.

Adder venom damages tissues through various digestive enzymes – it is, after all, derived from saliva. “This disrupts local blood supply and causes a massive inflammatory response and, potentially, localised necrosis. The addition of a few nerve and blood toxins into

this just adds to the problem.

“These toxic effects present as pain, oedema (swelling), haemorrhage (bleeding) and myonecrosis (muscle breakdown) and, on rare occasions, anaphylactic shock and death. I've seen cattle with their whole head swollen up like a balloon,” says Mr Luckhurst.

Adder bites are often seen on the nose or head of cows and heifers – they can disturb a snake when foraging – or on the udder, if they've lain on one. “There's an increased chance of being bitten on a cooler, overcast day following a period of warm weather. The snakes are more alert and move more quickly when the weather is warm and tend to keep out of the way.”

Adders are common throughout mainland Britain and some of the islands off the west coast of Scotland. They are easy to identify, due to the dark zigzag stripe down their back. And they are quite



short with large heads and slanted rather than round eyes. They are not aggressive and will only bite if they are disturbed.

Snake venom is discharged through hollow fangs in the upper jaw from glands found below each eye. The volume of venom released varies between adder bites depending on the situation. The more venom injected the more serious the toxic effect.

“It's important to keep a close eye on dry cows and heifers during the summer if they're on grazing

known to be at risk, generally more extensive units with large areas of rough ground,” says Mr Luckhurst. “Speedy treatment improves recovery by helping to reduce the inflammatory response as soon as possible.

“I have seen a fatality in a cow that was bitten on the udder. She developed necrosis of the udder and didn't respond to treatment. Skin necrosis and fairly extensive sloughing can occur in cases not treated quickly and these can look unpleasant for lengthy periods of time.”

He adds that an adder bite is painful and potentially serious, but there are more poisonous snakes in other countries.

“Producers in Australia have a lot more to worry about – brown snake bites can kill in minutes. Fatalities are very rare in the UK and they're actually relatively uncommon in Australia too.”