

Best practice guide for the control of bovine respiratory disease





Introduction

This guide aims to offer helpful information about the disease, ways of preventing it and options for treatment if your herd does succumb to Bovine Respiratory Disease (BRD).

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What is Bovine Respiratory Disease (BRD)?

BRD (Bovine Respiratory Disease) can refer to any disease of the lungs and airways of cattle, but most often refers to infections of the lung tissue by viruses and bacteria, also known as pneumonia. For such infections to establish, there are often multiple contributing environmental factors, and the damage may be irreversible if not treated.

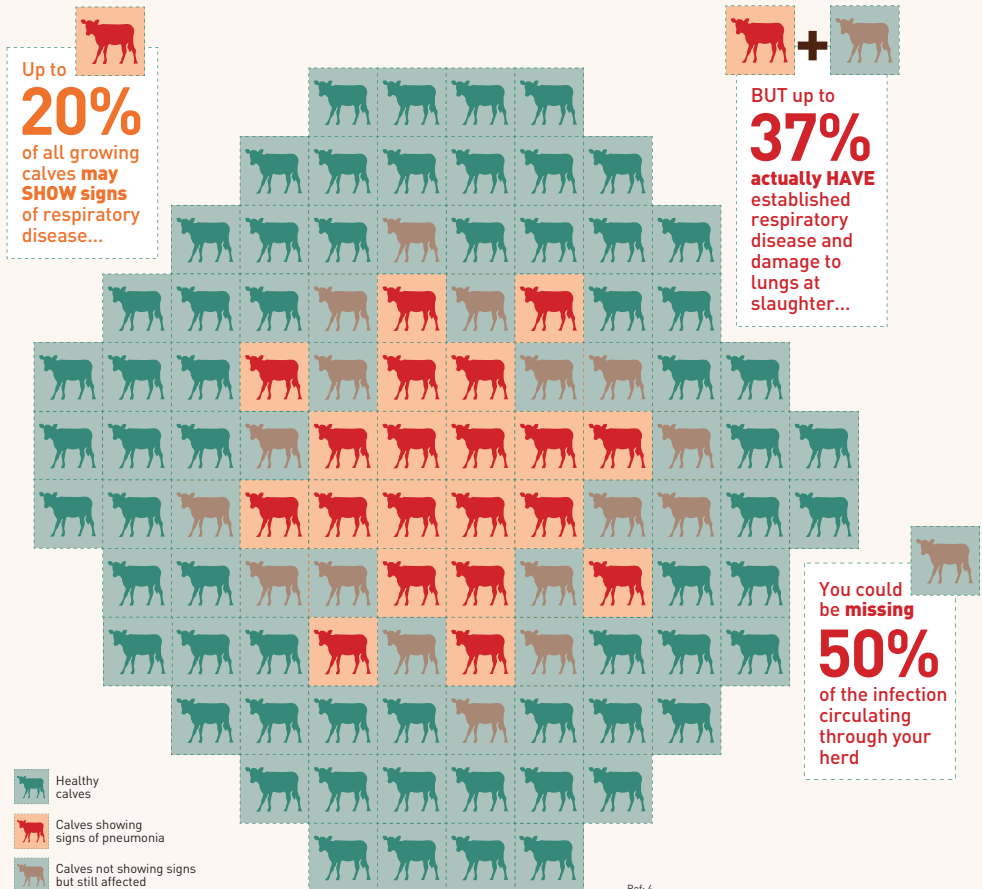
The disease is often not detected in its early stages, so has often spread rapidly within the herd by the time of diagnosis.

This condition is mainly seen during the housing period and is a huge concern both in terms of animal welfare and economic loss across both the beef and dairy herd. Most BRD disease is seen in young stock (calf pneumonia).

Costs

The total cost to the UK cattle industry is estimated at £80 million per year.¹

The average cost per calf in an outbreak of calf pneumonia can range between **£30-£80**², but can increase to **£500** or more if an animal dies because of the disease.³





Financial losses are incurred by:

- Reduced liveweight gain of up to 0.2kg per day⁵
- Cost of medicines and treatment
- Extra labour required to treat sick animals
- Calf losses and costs of disposal
- Extra feed and time required to bring animals to slaughter weight
- An additional 14 days taken to reach breeding weights in young beef stock. Some calves will need re-treatment, which will push costs up even further.

It's not just a calf disease - pneumonia in adult cattle can lead to reduced fertility and productivity which can also cause grave financial losses in the long term.

Causes of Bovine Respiratory Disease

Usually pneumonia is caused primarily by a virus followed by secondary bacterial infections – together these have a negative impact on the animal. The animal's environment will be a major contributing factor as to whether it is likely to succumb to respiratory disease.

Infectious Agents

Viruses – It is most common for cases of BRD to originate from a primary viral infection such as:

- Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV)
- Parainfluenza 3 virus (PI3)
- Infectious Bovine Rhinotracheitis (IBR)
- Bovine Viral Diarrhoea (BVD)

Bacterial Infection – These act as a secondary attack after damage from initial viral infection, utilising the animal's reduced immunity. Bacterial agents such as *Histophilus somni*, *Mannheimia haemolytica* and *Pasteurella multocida* are the main culprits.

Parasites – Lungworm can cause irreversible damage to an animal's lungs and can lead on to further respiratory disease if not treated.

Environment

Mixing Stock – Mixing bought-in stock with current stock can increase the risk of exposure to various different pneumonia-causing bacteria and viruses, which they have not encountered before and therefore have not developed an immunity to.

Weather – Fluctuations in weather from extreme warm temperate to sudden cold spells can be challenging to all ages of cattle.

Nutrition – Both colostrum and feed quality is vital during the highest risk period of winter housing.



Animal

Breed – different cattle breeds can grow at different rates, which not only has an impact on an individual animal's lung capacity but can also affect how well the animal adapts to its growing body. Some breeds will have a lower lung capacity or less mature lungs, these factors contribute to the animal's susceptibility to BRD.

Age – younger stock naturally have a weaker immune system than mature stock. Young stock are also most at risk of BRD, as colostrum levels decline, their immune system experiences a drop in antibodies.

There are a number of additional contributory factors associated with pneumonia, many of which could be managed through husbandry techniques or easily avoided as part of calf management on farm.

- **Stress on Calves** - Weaning, disbudding and castration can weaken a calf’s immune system and make it less able to fight off pneumonia infections.
- **Bought-In Stock** - Mixing calves from different sources can lead to non-immune calves being exposed to various different pneumonia-causing bacteria and viruses.
- **Overstocking** - Can lead to stress and build-up of infection in closely stocked areas increasing the transmission of airborne pathogens. The table below indicates ideal minimum space allowance for different size of cattle.

Sizes	Unobstructed space allowance
Up to 150kg	1.5m ²
150kg to 200kg	2m ²
Over 200kg	3m ²

Fig 2. Source: DEFRA code of recommendations for the welfare of livestock (2000)

- **Ventilation** – Lack of adequate ventilation in livestock buildings can cause build-ups of infection and humidity which can spread infections rapidly.

However, over-ventilated buildings could leave calves in draughty conditions, which will not only predispose them to developing pneumonia due to being cold but more energy will be used on maintaining body temperature and immunity rather than going into live weight gain.



Image courtesy of NADIS

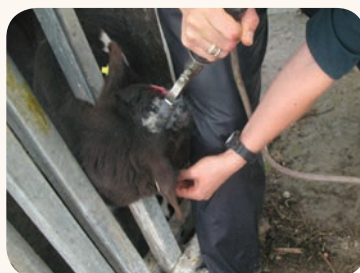


Image courtesy of NADIS

100% clean, fresh air can kill airborne bacteria and viruses 10–20 times quicker than 50% fresh air⁶.

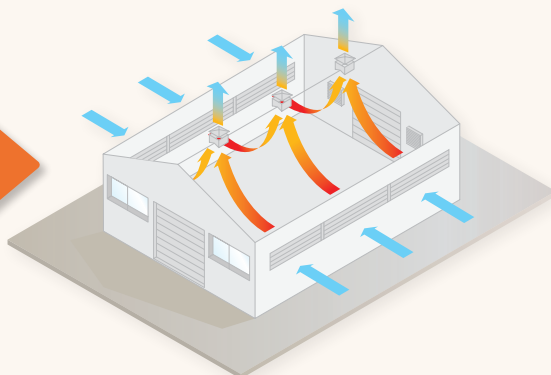


Fig 2. Ideal shed ventilation - The stack effect.

Symptoms

There are various **symptoms** that are associated with calf pneumonia, including:

- **Respiratory distress**
- **Nasal discharge**
- **Coughing**
- **Rapid, shallow breathing or mouth breathing**
- **Loss of appetite**
- **Weight loss or failing to gain weight**
- **Signs of pain**
- **High temperature (>39.5°C/ 103F)**
- **In some cases death**

Numerous field studies have suggested that rectal temperature is the most cost-effective method to identify respiratory disease in large groups as relying on signs such as coughing and nasal discharge will lead to under-diagnosis of the problem.

In mild cases there can be significant damage to the lung before any of the above clinical signs are evident. By the time a severe clinical case is obvious, there are likely to be more sub-clinical cases within the exposed group of calves.

This can mean that any calves in contact with a clinical case could already have significant lung

damage from infection. These calves often go on to develop clinical pneumonia unless treated.

In the face of a severe outbreak of pneumonia, all in-contact calves can be treated to help prevent infection. The most common age for calves to be affected is between four and six weeks of age, as their colostrum antibodies decline, and their own antibodies have not yet reached significant levels.

Even after they recover affected calves are often slow to put on weight and fail to grow properly.

Controlling BRD

Calf pneumonia is a multifactorial disease and single elements cannot be considered in isolation. There are various things that can be done to help prevent outbreaks or limit the length and severity of outbreaks. These include:

- **Colostrum** - Adequate intake of colostrum in the first six hours of life is important. It provides the calf with antibodies whilst the gut wall is able to absorb them. Failure to ensure colostrum intake during this period can lower calves' resistance to microbial causes of pneumonia.
- **Bought-in stock** - When buying in weaned calves or cattle for finishing it's advisable to keep these separate to existing stock until a full health check or record assessment has been conducted. Mixing calves from different sources can lead to non-immune calves being exposed to various different pneumonia-causing bacteria and viruses. Ask your vet for advice on an effective assessment routine and vaccination for bought-in stock.



- **Stress on calves** - Weaning, transporting, disbudding and castration could all weaken a calf's immune system and make it less able to fight off pneumonia infections. Avoid disbudding and castration around the time of weaning as it has been suggested that these practices could be best conducted when the calf is young and still having a benefit from colostrum intake.
- **Housing conditions** - Having a well-ventilated building will reduce the risk of pneumonia pathogens being transmitted in the herd due to humidity and enclosed spaces. Ensuring ventilation above calf level will help to maintain calf body temperature; calves are susceptible to temperature stress if they are too cold. Also reducing calf core temperature means that more energy will be used up by maintaining immunity and body temperature rather than converting feed into all important live weight gain.
- **Cleanliness & biosecurity** - Dirty, wet, unhygienic calf accommodation can lead to build-up of bacteria and viruses, and also harmful substances in the air such as ammonia. Not only that, the virus causing IBR can survive for 30 days inside troughs and feeders. Routine cleaning and decontamination will aid in the reduction of pneumonia spread at these key communal points in the shed. Also ensuring bio-security measures are adhered to on the farm will be key to success of overall herd health.
- **Vaccination** - Like flu viruses in people, calf pneumonia viruses are not controlled by antibiotics, but may be prevented by vaccination. The type and use of vaccines against calf pneumonia viruses should be discussed with your vet, and some laboratory tests may be necessary to identify which viruses are present if the vaccination strategy is to be cost-effective. The choice of vaccination will depend on what age the animals should be treated, how long the vaccination is desired to last and also other likely diseases to be accounted for. Vaccination offers a good route to protecting the entire herd from the beginning of the risk season for pneumonia as even low level disease in calves can negatively impact on growth rate and productivity.

Treatment

Affected calves require extra nursing and treatment with **antibiotics** and **anti-inflammatory** medicines. To minimise the risk of spread of disease, sick calves should be isolated from the rest of the herd as soon as signs are spotted.

The most effective treatment of BRD consists of prompt administration of anti-inflammatory agents alongside appropriate antibiotics.

Treatment should be discussed with your vet.

Antibiotics control primary and secondary bacterial infections. Used with an antibiotic as an adjunctive therapy, the anti-inflammatory will aim to:

- **reduce temperatures**
- **reduce coughing**
- **reduce pulmonary congestion**
- **reduce relapse rate**
- **prevent residual lung damage**
- **combat the effects of bacterial toxins**

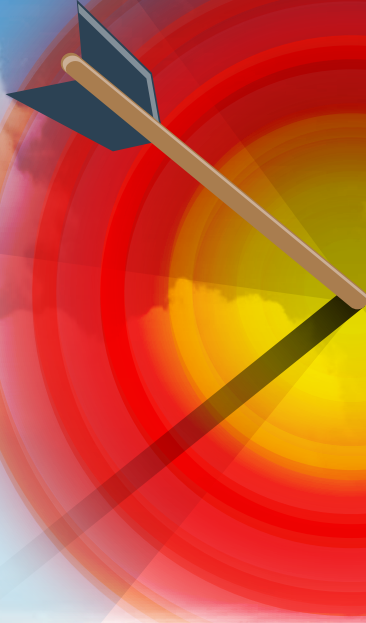
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- ² Caldow and Crawshaw 2005
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