

Proactive approach to facial eczema

A proactive approach with early supplementation is the key to minimising the risk of facial eczema. This is essential to support the liver from damage and subsequent production losses that can be seen with high spore counts. Accurate dosing for the right liveweight and use of a highly available zinc is the best way to start.

Facial eczema is caused by ingestion of spores of the fungus *Pithomyces chartarum* which lives mainly on ryegrasses. The spores of the fungus release a potent mycotoxin known as sporidesmin in the gastrointestinal tract, which causes damage to the liver (particularly the bile ducts), bladder and mammary glands. Environmental conditions generally favour spore growth in Summer and continue through to May. The fungus is active when there are warm nights above 12°C, for 3 nights in a row, particularly when there is a flush of grass and conditions are humid.

The name facial eczema would suggest a skin disease. Although in an outbreak, animals within the herd can show little or no signs. The problem lies under the skin, resulting in potentially serious liver damage, photosensitivity, and issues with reproduction. Most concerningly, it is estimated that for every 6% of the herd with skin lesions 38% of the herd have liver damage*. It is these animals that have a major impact economically due to reduced milk production.

A careful grazing management strategy can be used to help reduce the risk of cows ingesting large numbers of spores which tend to concentrate in the litter at the base of the pasture sward. It is important to monitor spore counts and take a proactive approach. The cost of dosing early far out ways the risk of leaving preventative treatments too late. Do not wait to see symptoms to act, cows will already be affected. Balancing pasture management and zinc supplementation need to work hand in hand. Zinc treatments should be started early – two to three weeks prior to spore counts starting to rise and reaching dangerous levels. Treatment should continue throughout the at-risk months.

The method of treating water with zinc for the control of facial eczema may be convenient. Due to the bitterness of zinc, palatability can be an issue. To overcome this, flavouring in water will support cows to continue drinking for production, regulate body temperature when it is hot and ensure they are drinking enough for the required zinc treatment.

SealesWinslow Zincmax+, is an easy to use product for supplementing Zinc. It's unique peppermint flavour masks the zinc taste, overcoming any palatability issues. It also contains organic copper. Zinc has an antagonistic effect on copper, reducing its absorption. If dosing is for an extended period, copper stores can be depleted, but the addition of organic copper in Zincmax+ will offset this and allow stock to maintain healthy copper levels. Zincmax+ is easily dissolved in water, suitable for use with in-line or trough dispensers and in convenient 20kg bags.

Reference *Dairy Australia. (2013). A Review of Facial Eczema