



## ERGOT ALERT!

Wet and humid conditions during grass flowering has caused a significant amount of ergot to be present on grass heads. Ergot is a fungus that infests grasses and if eaten in sufficient quantities is poisonous (to humans and livestock) due to the production of a mycotoxin. Ergot will only be seen in grasses that has already “headed-out”. Therefore unclipped pastures, ditches, and late mowed first cut will be the fields that most likely contain the fungus. Fields that do not “head-out” and are continuously mowed will not contract the disease. Ergot’s presence is observed by hard, dark-colored masses in flowering grass heads. These black masses are usually two to five times larger than the grass seed and are called ergot bodies.



The active toxin, ergotamine, stimulates the nerve centers that cause contraction of the small blood vessels supplying the different parts of the body. The result of ergot poisoning depends largely upon the amount of the fungus consumed. Because of the different amounts of the toxin found in ergot, it’s hard to know how much ergot in feed would cause a problem. Some reports show as little as three or four ounces of ergot kernels daily for 11 days can produce characteristic lameness in adult cattle. When only small quantities have been taken in, recovery without any serious symptoms may take place. Where large quantities have been consumed, dry gangrene in the extremities and death may result. General symptoms such as lack of appetite, dullness, abdominal pain, and subnormal temperature are common. So far, we have had minimal reporting of cattle exhibiting symptoms from ergot, which shows up as dark shiny black “kernels” that replace the kernels of grain.

The following are some of the hay, pasture and wild grasses on which ergot has been found in Vermont: red top, brome grass, orchard grass, timothy, fescues, blue grasses, perennial rye grass, and quack grass. The wet, humid, and hot conditions we experienced during flowering favored the production of this disease in large quantities. Susceptibility of different grass hosts relates to the length of time the flowers are open; hosts with longer flowering periods are more susceptible than those with shorter flowering periods.

The only treatment of ergot poisoning is to remove the contaminated feeds or remove animals from contaminated pasture. If advanced symptoms are present, consult a veterinarian about supplemental therapy. If large quantities are present in hay, it is best to destroy the hay. Pastures that show signs of infection should be mowed and let set two weeks before grazing.

For more information please contact Dr. Heather Darby at 802-524-6501 or Dr. Sid Bosworth at 802-656-0478.