

My cow is unable to stand up!



— M.S.K. Mashishi —



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Often we see animals lying down that are not able to stand up on their own. They might be lying down because they are sick or have walked a long distance. The problem is not necessarily with their feet. There are different diseases and conditions that can result in recumbent animals (animals lying down).

If only one animal is recumbent, then individual attention can be given. However, if most animals in the herd are recumbent, the possibility of plant poisoning, feed-related problems, water source problems or an outbreak of a disease should be investigated. Many other factors can also cause recumbent animals.

WHAT ARE THE CAUSES?

Malnutrition

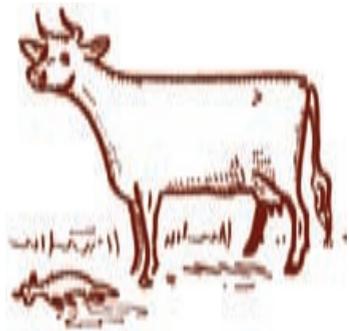
This is a condition where livestock get too little feed or poor-quality feed or both. It is mostly seen during dry winter periods and droughts. It often occurs where the veld is overgrazed.

Pregnant cows have a high demand for nutrients and they will be more severely affected. Poor-quality feed does not have the protein and energy needed to maintain the good condition of the animals. The animals gradually lose weight until they are too weak to walk short distances or even stand.

Animals that are suffering from malnutrition are at risk of being affected by other diseases because their defence mechanism (immune system) is weakened.

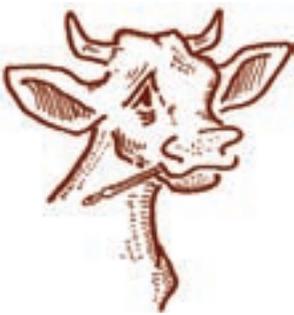
Pregnancy and birth-related problems

Nerves that are found on the inside of the thighs in both rear legs may be injured when



a cow has difficulty in calving or the attendant is too rough when pulling the calf out. The cow will be seen sitting down in a “frog position”. Thigh muscles are often bruised during difficult birth because of an oversized calf. Other nerve injuries of the legs occur when an animal has been recumbent for a long period.

Another important condition seen two to three days after giving birth is milk fever. If not treated immediately death may result.



Fever

Different diseases affecting other parts of the body can also result in recumbency. This is because the temperature of sick animals increases (fever) and causes weakness. For example, infection of the udder and uterus (womb), parasites in the blood (gallsickness or redwater), and three-day stiffness cause cattle to be recumbent.

Bone, joint and feet problems

Broken bones, dislocated hips, foot rot, arthritis or any spinal (back) problem such as an abscess exerting pressure on the spinal cord can cause an animal to lie down.

Plant poisoning

Poisoning occurs when animals have easy access to poisonous plants. These plants are usually among the first green plants during spring. Some are the first to appear after veld fires. Poisonings also occur after sudden changes in the weather or when fodder contains poisonous plants. Animals tend to prefer fresh green plants and a number of these are most toxic when they are in their growing stages.

Animals that are moved to a new grazing area are more prone to poisoning because they graze less selectively when all the plants are not familiar to

them. They can usually distinguish between nonpoisonous and poisonous plants in their area and will avoid poisonous plants unless forced to graze them because there is no other food available.

Different poisonous plants affect different systems of the body. Some cases of plant poisoning will result in recumbency, while others will manifest as diarrhoea or blindness.

Plants that affect the nerves and muscles, e.g. tulip, will cause paralysis of the rear legs in ruminants, especially cattle. Plants affecting the heart, lungs and brain will also cause animals to lie down but there will be other signs as well.

Deficiencies

A shortage of minerals, such as calcium, magnesium and phosphorus in the body causes recumbency. High-producing dairy cows, such as Jerseys, often suffer from milk fever. This condition mostly occurs two to three days after the cow has given birth. It is caused by a calcium deficiency in the body. The muscles of the head and legs will start shaking, the cow will have difficulty in walking and rising and eventually lies down on its chest with the neck twisted to the side. Most cows die if they are not treated within 12 hours.



A lack of phosphorus causes pica in animals (appetite for strange objects such as plastics, decaying carcasses, faeces, etc). Eating decaying carcasses and contaminated vegetation causes botulism in cattle.

WHAT ARE THE SIGNS?

- Animal lying on its side or chest for a period longer than normal.
- When prompted to stand they will not try or they will make unsuccessful attempts.



TREATMENT

- Animals suffering from malnutrition should receive adequate nursing and feeding care. They should be given clean water and good-quality feed. A multivitamin injection can also be given.
- If the animal is lying in the sun, move it to a place where there is enough bedding and shade and where the floor is not slippery. Remove faeces regularly and keep the floor warm, dry and clean.
- Change the position of the animal by turning it from side to side in the morning, during the day and at night. This is done to minimise muscle damage and to prevent sores on the hip bones.



- Depending on the size of the animal, daily try to make it stand by supporting it under the body with your hands (ask someone to help you) for a few minutes and then let it lie down again. You can also try and make it stand by fastening a bovijack (if available) to a tree. Homemade slings made from feed bags can also be used.
- Specific treatment can be given once the proper diagnosis is made. Consult your state or private veterinarian, or animal health technician.

PREVENTION

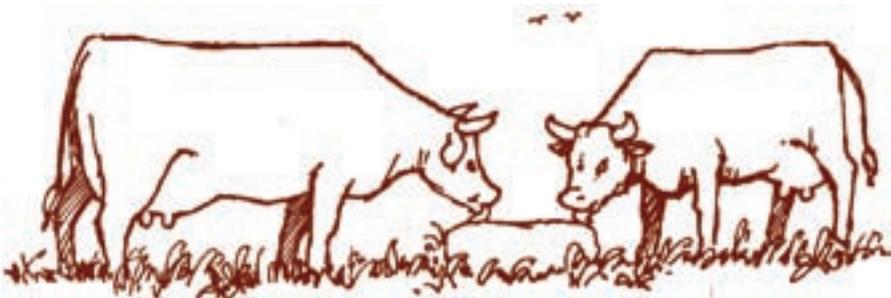
- Remove dead animals from the veld.
- Avoid overgrazing and veld fires.
- Feed livestock well during the winter months. Provide licks and supplementary feed.

- Take care when assisting the cow when she is giving birth.
- Keep animals away from places where poisonous plants occur.
- Botulism can be prevented by vaccination.



CAN THE ANIMAL RECOVER?

- Recovery depends on how long the animal has been lying down.
- If the animal has been lying down for a few days, then the chance of recovery will not be good, especially where heavy animals are concerned. Pressure on the muscles cause disruption of the blood flow to the muscles. This results in muscle damage.
- Animals that have been recumbent for a long period of time may suffer from pneumonia and hip dislocation.
- It is best to slaughter the animal before the body condition worsens or the animal dies, causing financial loss.
- The chance of recovery also depends on the cause. For example, if the condition is caused by milk fever, and it is identified in the early stages of the disease (within six hours) then the chances of recovery are good. If, however, the cause is a damaged nerve, the animal may not recover.



For further information about treatment and prevention of
recumbent animals, consult your nearest state or
private veterinarian or animal health technician

or

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