

Dog walkers asked to support efforts to curb cattle disease

Dog walkers are being asked to rally their support around new efforts to curb a potentially fatal disease in cattle.

The parasite-based *Neospora caninum* has been on the rise for a number of years in British cattle herds. While it has absolutely no effect on the quality or safety of meat or milk, infection often culminates in the loss of unborn calves among pregnant cows.

“The challenge is that *Neospora* uses dogs as hosts to complete its lifecycle – hence the ‘*caninum*’ in its name,” says Tim Brigstocke, who heads up Cattle Health Certification Standards (CHeCS), an organisation that oversees schemes to reduce disease in cattle.

“*Neospora*’s seriousness was illustrated in a 2013 storyline in ‘The Archers’ where a number of cows lost their calves after infection was spread by a dog – but this fiction is not far from reality,” he says.

“Cattle health experts are now hoping dog walkers will help break this deadly cycle of infection and are urging dog owners to watch over their pets to ensure they don’t eat any suspect material in fields – as well as pick up after them on grazing land in particular.”

Mr Brigstocke explains that cows often calve outside and, occasionally, placentas don’t get spotted and removed in time by farm staff. “If the cow is carrying the disease undetected and a dog eats her placenta, the *Neospora* is likely to infect the dog – who will in turn shed the parasite’s eggs in its faeces, starting the whole cycle again.

“This is why we are asking dog owners to keep a watchful eye on their pets on their walks and pick up after them as well as keep them away from any suspect material. It’s better for the dog too – while most remain largely unaffected, there can be a risk of nervous system disorders which can be transmitted to pups,” he says.

TV Vet Joe Inglis has backed the effort, saying owners shouldn’t underestimate the role their dog can play in farm animal health.

“Keeping an eye on your pet when you’re off the beaten track not only stops them worrying animals but you can also make sure they don’t eat something they shouldn’t, and you’ll know where to pick up after them,” he says.

Neospora is a relatively new disease, having been discovered in Norway in 1984. There are currently no licensed medicines for the treatment of *Neospora* infection in cattle. Nor are

there any vaccines available in the UK so preventative measures are key to controlling the spread of *Neospora*.

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Photos of Neospora, Joe Inglis and cow and calf available on request.

CHeCS was established by the cattle industry for the control and eradication of non-statutory diseases, using a set of standards to which all licensed cattle health schemes must adhere.