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Eye Cancer and Third Eyelid Cancers in Cattle

Cancer eye in cattle is a squamous cell carcinoma and is like the more common types of skin cancer in humans.

We see three main types of eye cancer: -

- Cancer of the third eyelid
- Cancer on the eyeball
- Cancer of the top or bottom eyelid

Cancer of the third eyelid



The third eyelid is a membrane that lies on the nose side of the eye and helps clean the eyeball of dust and other foreign matter.

Third eyelids are either pink or black depending on the breed of cattle. Only pink third eyelids are prone to developing cancer. We very rarely see third eyelid cancers in Jerseys but commonly see it in Holsteins.

While third eyelid cancers are common, they are easy to remove so long as they are treated promptly. If left too long the cancer can become quite extensive and is harder to treat, in some cases it cannot be treated at all.

Abattoir regulations against eye cancers are strict and so in advanced disease the animal may not be allowed through an abattoir, meaning she will need to be sent to the knackery, losing the carcass value.

It is likely that eye cancers grow more quickly in the later stages of pregnancy because the cow's immune system is suppressed, so this is another risk period where you should check eyes frequently.

If the cancers are detected early, they can be surgically removed.

Cancer on the eyeball



Cancer on the eyeball is less common than third eyelid cancer. These cancers usually start on the margin of the white part and dark part of the eyeball and look a little bit like a cauliflower.

If they are detected early, these cancers can be treated using cryotherapy. However, if the cancer is detected in a more advance stage, the cow often requires the eye to be removed.

Eye cancer detection

Eye cancers of the left eye are worse on some farms and on other farms the right eye seems to be more severely affected.

Our theory is that on rotary dairies that spin anti-clockwise the right eye is seen twice a day by the cups-on person. The left eye is not seen as often, and so eye cancers have progressed further before they are noticed.

The opposite is true for platforms that spin clockwise.

Cows in herringbone dairies may have a similar problem if they only go in one side and that is the side where their eye cancer develops.

So, what is the answer? It may be worthwhile to designate one milking a month to eye cancer detection of the eye that is normally hidden. On anti-clockwise platforms, for example somebody positions him or herself in a position to observe left eyes. A good place to do this is the exit race.