

GRASS TETANY (STAGGERS)

Grass tetany, also known as grass staggers and hypomagnesaemia, is a metabolic disease in goats. Although often called wheat pasture poisoning, grass tetany is not restricted to wheat fields. This disease usually occurs in springtime in lush pastures, but it *can also appear following cool rainy weather in the fall when cool season grasses and green cereal grains are beginning to grow.*

Like prussic acid poisoning and nitrate poisoning, grass tetany kills quickly. Death often occurs within two to three hours of onset of the disease. It is basically a magnesium deficiency caused by an imbalance of potassium with calcium and magnesium that requires veterinary assistance

to treat and producer involvement to prevent.

Symptoms include wide-eyed staring, muscle twitching in the ears and flanks, hypersensitivity to sound and touch, staggering, foaming at the mouth, and convulsions. Goats most at risk are lactating does (milk production involves the utilization of lots of magnesium) and older goats. Least at risk are young goats, wethers, dry does, and younger adult bucks.

Soil conditions and fertilization practices can contribute to grass tetany. Soils and fertilizers high in potassium and nitrogen can produce plants that contain high potassium and low calcium and magnesium levels that can suppress magnesium absorption.

If the producer can obtain veterinary assistance quickly, the proper treatment involves slow intravenous (IV) admini-

stration of calcium and magnesium. This is not something that the average goat producer can do. In an emergency when a vet is not available, the producer can try to save the goat by treating it as if it had "milk fever" (hypocalcaemia) with repeated dosing of CMPO or MFO orally. See this writer's article on Hypocalcaemia on the Articles page at www.tennesseemeatgoats.com.

Prevention is the key. Producers should offer quality hay free choice to goats that have access to pastures that can cause grass tetany. Goats should also receive a quality loose mineral properly formulated with higher levels of magnesium and offered on a free-choice basis.

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