

# Fescue Foot Alert

by **DAVID BURTON,**  
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Fescue is a great fall and winter forage, thanks to its ability to be stockpiled for grazing during cold, snowy weather. Unfortunately, some pastures may contain high levels of toxins such as ergovaline, a compound produced by an endophyte fungus prevalent in Kentucky 31 fescue, says Eldon Cole, a University of Missouri Extension livestock specialist.

Ergovaline causes a constriction of the blood vessels, which, coupled with sensitive cattle and freezing weather, may result in fescue foot, he explains. The first noted symptoms are stiffness and soreness in the rear feet and legs.

“It is easier to detect this symptom early on cold mornings when the

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**Winter weather  
can increase the  
level of ergovaline  
toxin in fescue.**

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cattle first come off their beds,” says Cole. “There may be swelling in the pastern and the lower leg. If the

cattle are not removed soon, there can be a break in the skin around the hoof or leg area. The break appears to be the result of a fine wire wrapped around the area.”

Someone unacquainted with fescue foot first thinks the swelling and soreness is from foot rot. Antibiotic treatment as soon as possible aids foot rot, but does nothing for fescue foot.

“The best treatment for fescue foot is to remove the affected animals immediately from the pasture. Simply placing them on another fescue pasture may help,” says Cole. “Just to be on the safe side, drylot the really sore-footed cattle and give them hay and some concentrate feed.”

According to Cole, affected animals should show improvement in a few days. If the ergovaline level was high, the animal may draw up, resist moving and even lose a toe or the lower part of the leg. Cattle not so severely affected may lose their tail switch and ultimately have rear hooves that grow out.

“There are differences in animals’ susceptibility to the fescue toxins. Genetic predisposition is one possibility,” he says. “Cattle that have not been used to an ergovaline insult in their diet from fescue are more susceptible. This latter situation is seen when cattle are purchased and brought to the fescue belt from non-ergovaline-producing forage areas.”

Fescue-foot does not appear to the same degree every year. Environment and management seem to trigger bad responses. This year’s lush fall growth in southwest Missouri could make the risk higher, Cole says.

Plant breeders have developed

novel-endophyte-bearing fescue varieties that reduce, or totally eliminate the risk of fescue foot. Farmers with persistent fescue sensitivity problems, whether fescue foot in cold weather or heat stress in warm weather, should look

into replacing the culprit fescue stands with the novel, or “friendly,” fescue or another variety of pasture.

For more information, contact your local extension livestock specialist.



**Editor’s Note:** *Burton is civic communications specialist for the University of Missouri in southwest Missouri.*