Warts: A Common Skin Problem in Young Cattle

by **HEATHER SMITH THOMAS**

Weanlings and yearlings often develop warts. Matt Miesner, clinical assistant professor in the Kansas State University College of Veterinary Medicine, says young animals are highly susceptible until they build immunity to the wart virus. "If I see warts in an older animal, I suspect some type of underlying immune deficiency or stress," he says.

Wart virus can be transmitted from one animal to another. "There are at least 10 different papilloma viruses that cause warts. A couple cause penile warts in young bulls; other types affect skin, GI (gastrointestinal) tract or teats," Miesner says.

The virus can be spread by direct contact or by coming into contact with something the infected animal has touched.

Warts often appear where skin has been broken. They may develop in ears or dewlap skin after tagging. When tagging several animals, it pays to disinfect the tagging tool between animals. The growths often appear quickly, becoming a rough-looking or smooth-shaped mass. They may be small and rounded or very large. A large mass in an ear may make the ear droop down.

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"One goes by and scratches on a post; the next one picks it up," Miesner explains.

"If a new animal comes into a herd (or cattle have contact with a neighbor's cattle) and brings a different type of virus, some of the herd will get warts. Eventually it spreads through the herd, and they all develop immunity," he says.

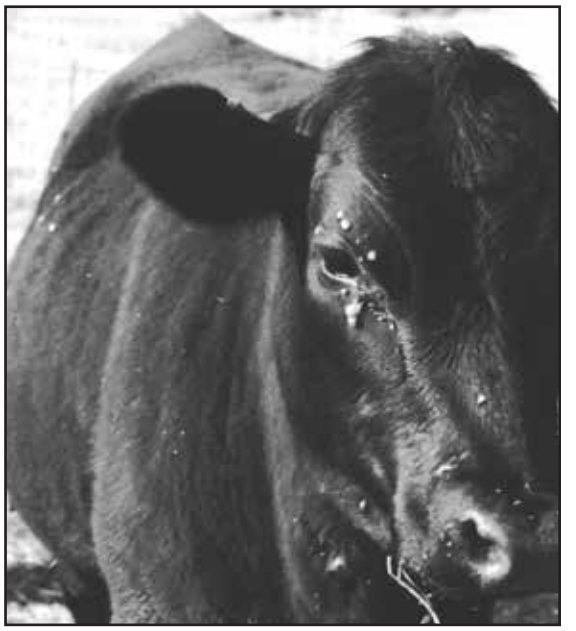
If warts are a problem for an animal (around the mouth or nostrils, interfering with breathing or eating, or on the teats), some veterinarians suggest carefully pulling, twisting or snipping off one of the warts, crushing a small one or removing part of a large mass. Disrupting the wart encourages the animal's immune system to create antibodies and fight the warts more quickly; the virus in disrupted warty tissue comes into contact with the bloodstream if the area bleeds a little.

"A multivalent commercial vaccine for warts is made by Colorado Serum Company. They continually acquire samples of different types of warts and make antigen in their vaccines that are effective against most warts," Miesner says.

"Unfortunately, we don't see blanket success, due to variations in individual immunity and response to the vaccination," he explains.

"Another option, if that doesn't work (since there are so many different types of warts) is to have an autogenous vaccine created. This is made from pieces of warty tissue from your own animals. The downside is that you generally need to collect at least 200 to 300 grams of wart, and the company may insist that you order a certain number of doses of vaccine. It might not be worth it for just a few cattle, but cost-effective if you have a large-scale problem," he says.

"Bull studs often vaccinate to reduce penile warts. We always check for warts in a breeding soundness exam. This is one reason we make the bull extend his penis for the exam. The wart itself is generally not a problem, and young animals generally resolve these on their own. But if the bull tried to breed a cow and bleeding occurred due to disruption of a wart, the semen would become ineffective, rendering him infertile," Miesner says.



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Editor's Note: *Heather Smith Thomas is a cattlewoman and freelance writer from Salmon, Idaho.*