

The term “downer cow” is used to describe a cow that has gone down and cannot stand up. Two of the main causes of downer cows are deficiencies in calcium and magnesium. The stage of production that the cow is in when she goes down can help the producer determine which mineral the cow is likely deficient in. If the cow goes down after calving, shortage of calcium is likely the source. If she goes down before calving, the cow is likely deficient in magnesium. This deficiency is most prevalent during the third trimester of pregnancy.

A method to prevent magnesium deficiency from occurring in your herd is to ensure your cows are provided a sufficient quantity of salt. It has been found that salt intake has a positive effect on magnesium absorption, making the animal less susceptible to having a magnesium deficiency. A widely used source of prevention in the past is to supply a high magnesium mineral for the herd. One problem with this product is that it is not very palatable for the cows. Because of this, the cows generally will not consume as much of the mineral as they need, so they are not receiving the adequate amount of salt required for prevention of magnesium deficiency. A 2:1 Calcium:Phosphorus mineral may be a good alternative because it seems to be more palatable for the cows. The cows are more willing to consume this product, and therefore are more likely to consume a satisfactory amount of salt, which better prevents magnesium deficiency from occurring.

Please note that calcium deficiency, or milk fever, is most commonly seen in dairy breeds due to the high quantity of milk produced. Calcium deficiency is seldom seen in the average beef cow because she often has a much lower milk production.

The cost of prevention is much lower than the amount a producer will invest in a downer cow. Salt should be readily available to your herd, especially during the last trimester of pregnancy, for the prevention of magnesium deficiency. For more information about downer cows, or the prevention of mineral deficiencies, please contact us.