

Preventing Blackleg in Cattle

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Vaccination of cattle as a herd health procedure to prevent diseases such as Blackleg is not practised enough in Jamaica. It is primarily done by medium to large cattle operators, but small farmers who collectively own a significant percentage of the cattle population rarely vaccinate. The following are some reasons given why vaccination is not practised:

- Unaware of the reason or purpose of vaccination
- Availability of vaccine
- False belief that cattle will not get Blackleg while grazed with a donkey
- Accessibility to a veterinarian

Why should farmers vaccinate their cattle? Jamaica boasts four locally developed breeds of cattle, Jamaica Hope, Jamaica Red, Jamaica Black and the Jamaica Brahman. We are free of many diseases that affect cattle in other parts of the world. However, there are infectious diseases in Jamaica that will affect cattle and vaccination can significantly minimize any losses due to sickness or death.



Above: A Jamaica Black bull – the loss of such a fine animal to blackleg would be disastrous.

Blackleg caused by the bacterium *Clostridium chauvoei* – not a spider bite as is commonly believed by Jamaican farmers. Unvaccinated cattle are highly susceptible to this disease and usually die suddenly without showing any signs of illness. Sometimes, affected animals may show severe lameness, droopiness and have a hot painful swelling over muscled areas before death which usually occurs within 12 to 24 hours. Dead animals usually have swelling in heavy muscled areas of hip and shoulder chest or back with pockets of gas developing under the skin in these areas. In many instances the best calf, bull or cow is the first to die.

Timely vaccination of cattle can virtually prevent this disease. The first vaccination is given at two to four months of age, repeated four to six weeks later. Calves are usually revaccinated at weaning, seven to nine months old while adult cattle can be vaccinated at any time. An annual booster vaccination is required to maintain protection.

Veterinarians and/or Animal Health Technicians should be involved with the execution of any vaccination programme.

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