

# Tips for Overall Cattle Health

Uncover the basics—from the cardinal signs of stress and illness to the most essential elements of feedlot health. The health of your cattle is both a practical and emotional concern that directly affects your feedlot's success. Having a deep understanding of the basics of care and the main signs of overall illness will help you support and produce high-performing cattle.

## Most Important Signs of Stress

Stress can have a huge effect on cattle health and productivity, and it can put your cattle at risk of developing Bovine Respiratory Disease (BRD). Knowing the three primary and fundamental signs of stress in your livestock, referred to as cardinal signs of stress, will allow you to better recognize them and reduce their common causes on the feedlot.<sup>1</sup> The three cardinal signs of stress include:<sup>2</sup>

- A decrease in feed consumption
- A lethargic appearance with a poorly groomed coat
- An increase in disease or illness on the feedlot

## Common Signs of Illness

Knowing the common signs of illness in your cattle will help you better support their overall health and support the earlier detection of disease. The most common signs of illness in your cattle include:<sup>3</sup>

- Isolation—when your animals isolate themselves from the rest of the group or present a slightly bowed head and ears
- A cough, nasal discharge, sunken eyes and/or difficulty breathing
- Lack of natural movement and/or exercise
- Decreased appetite and/or decreased feed consumption
- Diarrhea, difficulty urinating and/or a temperature (rectal) of over 40°C (104°F)
- Poorly groomed and/or presenting a dry hair coat
- A lethargic appearance with a lowered head and ears and an arched back



## The Essentials of Cattle Health

Water, nutrition and the environment your livestock live in are the three most essential elements of livestock health and production—no matter what kind of operation you run.<sup>4</sup> When these three elements are prioritized, disease detection, prevention and treatment can all be more successful.

**Water:** While water may seem like an obvious component of your feedlot operation, there is more to consider than just access. Water consumption encourages feed intake and ensures that cattle are consuming a well-balanced diet. Sudden changes in water consumption can be a telltale sign of illness and an indicator that your cattle may experience a health-related event in the near future.<sup>4</sup> Ensuring that your water sources are clean, that your cattle are familiar with the location of water sources and that your cattle are consuming a healthy amount of water can support the health of your livestock.

**Nutrition:** While every operator has their own nutritional plan for their livestock, all cattle need a balanced diet of proteins, vitamins and minerals.<sup>5</sup> Feed delivery should be scheduled at the same time every day and bunks should be monitored for feed intake.<sup>6</sup> You may consider working with a nutritionist to formulate the best rations for your cattle and create a feed that is specific to your cattle's needs.<sup>5</sup>

**Environment:** The success of your feedlot and the health of your livestock is closely tied to the design of your facilities and the overall stress that your cattle experience at your operation. Since stress can increase the risk of disease, it is important to promote a calm and clean environment for your cattle to live in. Your facilities should be designed to give your cattle plenty of room to move around and encourage the natural movement of your livestock. Plenty of bunk and pen space,<sup>6</sup> clean and comfortable bedding<sup>5</sup> and encouraging the consumption of food and water as soon as possible will also help support animal health. Encouraging lying cattle to move around and exercise can also support overall performance.<sup>2</sup>

Animal health is critical to a successful feedlot, and it starts with water, nutrition and the environment they live in. When you deepen your understanding of the basics of care and the main signs of stress and illness, you can help enhance cattle health on your feedlot and support optimal production outcomes.



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## Sources:

<sup>1</sup> Government of Alberta. (n.d.). *Recognizing and Reducing Stress in Feedlot Cattle*.

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<sup>2</sup> Radostits, O. M. (n.d.). *Feedlot Health Management*. Alberta Feedlot Management Guide.

<http://www.agromedia.ca/AFMG/Section%202%20Health%20Management/2A1%20Feedlot%20Health%20Management.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Sperber, J. L. (2023). *Welcome to the Feedlot: Best Practices for Managing Newly Received Feeder Calves*. University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources, Beef Extension.

<https://beef.unl.edu/beefwatch/2023/welcome-feedlot-best-practices-managing-newly-received-feeder-calves>

<sup>4</sup> Schefers, J. (2012). *Priorities that Impact Feedlot Health*. The Cattle Site.

<https://www.thecattlesite.com/articles/3213/priorities-that-impact-feedlot-health/>

<sup>5</sup> Farm Journal Inc. (2024). *Keep Your Cattle Thriving: 4 Tips for Feedlot Health*. Trust in Beef. Merck Animal Health USA.

<https://www.trustinbeef.com/2024/03/04/keep-your-cattle-thriving-4-tips-for-feedlot-health/>

<sup>6</sup> Armstrong, J. (2023). *10 Things to Improve Feedlot Performance*. University of Minnesota Beef Extension.

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