FEATURE

Gut Health:

Why It's Smart to Make It a *Year-Round Priority*

• *BY SUZANNE QUIGLEY* •

Farmers and livestock producers all share the same challenge - animals get sick. And although illness can strike without warning at any time, periods of transition, such as sudden weather swings and seasonal changes, can exacerbate illness. Breeding, birthing, and weaning can also wreak havoc and upset the status quo.

These challenges stress animals, weakening their immune systems and making them more susceptible to disease. The good news is that modern animal health management increasingly recognizes that digestive function plays a significant role in immune response.

We've learned that stress is an enemy of gut stability. Gut instability weakens immunity, opening the door to health issues such as scours, respiratory ailments, and more. On the other hand, a healthy gut can strengthen an animal's resilience and shorten recovery time.

For retailers and dealers, this creates an opportunity. By educating producers about the benefits of proactive gut support and how this approach improves animal outcomes and saves money—especially during predictable stress periods—such useful advice can build customer trust and loyalty.

Gut Health Matters

The gastrointestinal or GI tract is not simply a feed-processing tube. It's the largest immune organ in the body, said Ron Scott, Ph.D, Director of Beef Technical Innovation at Purina, in the article, "The Gut is the Largest Immune Organ in the Body" on the website *Drovers.com*.

The GI tract absorbs nutrients, minerals, and water needed to maintain health, but it's also a barrier to infection by restricting pathogens and microbes from entering the body/bloodstream. When gut health is strong, livestock have robust appetites, convert feed efficiently, produce consistent manure, respond better to vaccines, and recover more quickly from health challenges. Poor gut health invites pathogen invasion, dulls appetite, causes nutrient loss, and raises disease risk.

The Stress–Gut–Immunity Connection

When animals encounter stress, not uncommon with transport, seasonal transitions, birthing, or feed changes, the body releases cortisol. This release diverts blood flow away from the digestive tract to other parts of the body, impairing the normal digestive process.
Diminished blood flow reduces oxygen delivery to intestinal cells, weakens the "tight junctions" of the gut barrier, and alters the gut microbiome. This alteration disrupts the balance of good vs. bad bacteria. This condition is often called "leaky gut."

When the gut barrier weakens, toxins enter the bloodstream, suppressing immune function and leading to poor nutrient absorption and reduced feed conversion. Animals exposed to these byproducts of gut instability are typically more susceptible to disease.

Initially, animals may not look sick, but they don't appear to be at their best. That's often how gut instability presents following a stress period—and farmers or livestock producers may not recognize this, but rather just chalk it up to poor nutrition or pathogens.

Spring: Feed Changes & Weather Swings

Spring is one of the highest-risk periods for gut disruption.

Key stressors:

- Transition from stored feed to pasture
- Rapid carbohydrate increases in young grass
- Freeze-thaw temperature shifts
- Mud & hygiene challenges
- Increased parasite exposure

As livestock shift to pasture, the gut needs to adjust accordingly. Intestinal bacteria that digest fiber must adapt to sugars. As the gut adjusts, pH levels fluctuate. Microorganisms in the gut die and release toxins that can trigger inflammation. Animals may exhibit loose manure and decreased appetite.

Livestock owners and producers often attribute this to "grass scours." Still, the underlying issue is microbial instability as bacteria readjust to the transition from feed to pasture, leading to a weakened intestinal barrier.

Dealers and store owners—here's an opportunity for you! As spring approaches, recommend a gradual transition to pasture. Taking it slowly allows the digestive system to become acclimated with minimal upset. Additionally, suggest supplementing with gut-support products, such as Durvet's Probiotics Gel™ and Probiotics Powder™, before starting turn-out—not after scours appear.

Calving, Lambing & Kidding

Birthing season is the year's single largest immune challenge. Expectant dams experience metabolic stress and hormonal changes, which can lead to reduced feed intake and inflammation.

Newborns can be exposed to pathogens immediately at birth, and their still-immature immune systems offer no protection. The maternal gut strongly influences colostrum quality and the success of passive transfer. If the dam's gut barrier is compromised, colostrum antibodies decrease, pathogen load increases, and offspring immunity fails to receive the jumpstart so essential to the survival of the newborns.

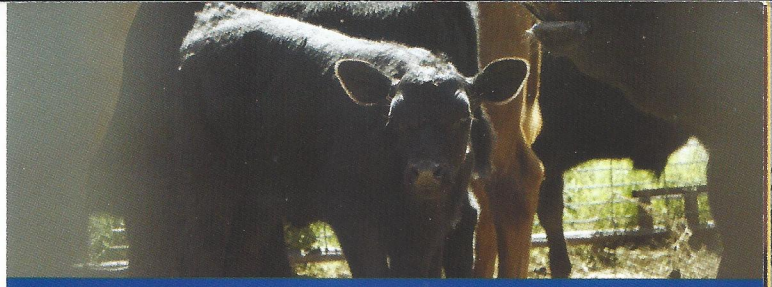
If the dam can't provide sufficient, high-quality colostrum, the newborns become susceptible. This is why scours outbreaks often trace back to dam health weeks before birth. It's not always just environmental sanitation.

This situation presents another opportunity for dealers and retailers to educate customers. Position gut support products as a pre-birth preparation tool to avoid post-birth health challenges.

Heat Stress (Summer)

Even moderate heat dramatically alters animals' digestion. Because blood flow shifts from the gut to the skin to cool the body, animals often respond with appetite loss. This lack of interest in food has internal origins.

Less blood flow deprives intestinal cells of oxygen, weakening the gut barrier. Immune function suffers, animals lose weight, and milk yield decreases. Heat stress is therefore partly a disorder of gut integrity. Supporting hydration alone helps—but maintaining intestinal stability reduces related disease challenges and performance losses.



Weaning

Weaning creates multiple stressors:

- separation
- diet change
- transport
- regrouping
- vaccination

This variety of stressors wreaks havoc and is a classic trigger for respiratory disease in many species.

Why respiratory?

Because compromised gut integrity weakens systemic immunity, the lungs become vulnerable after intestinal inflammation diverts immune resources. This explains why animals often develop pneumonia after digestive upset or changes in feed.

Why Year-Round Support Makes Sense

Reactive treatment focuses on fighting illness after symptoms appear. But disease often begins days or weeks earlier at the gut barrier, with the animal displaying some malaise, but nothing that appears serious.

Proactive gut support helps animals to better tolerate stressful conditions, maintain appetite, reduce inflammation, and minimize immune response. Practically speaking, a preventive approach reduces the need for medication, improves animals' responses to vaccination, stabilizes performance, and decreases mortality.

For farmers and producers, taking a preventive stance leads to more predictable outcomes with livestock and reduces the likelihood of crises. The upcoming spring feeding transition from feed to pasture is a timely example. Dealers and retail store owners should talk to customers about how they make this change with their livestock. Is it all at once, or do they gradually increase the turnout?

Discuss how preparing livestock with gut-support supplementation before introducing animals to pasture can improve the transition. Explain how supporting gut health maintains the level of "good" bacteria in the intestinal tract, so pathogens remain minimal to avoid overloading and weakening the immune system.

The bottom line is, animals don't need help recovering from stress—they need help tolerating it. Dealers and retailers who help producers develop a plan that benefits animal health outcomes become management partners—not just suppliers.

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Gut Health

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Gut Health Takeaways

Across species, seasons, and production goals, one principle holds:

Stress doesn't just cause disease—it disrupts the gut first.

Once the gut weakens:

- immunity declines
- pathogens gain an advantage
- performance suffers

But when stress periods are predictable, gut disruption can be prevented. By educating customers to support gut function before visible problems arise, dealers and farm retailers help producers achieve healthier animals, more consistent performance, reduced treatment costs, and better long-term profitability.

And in today's production environment, achieving these outcomes is a major accomplishment.

Final Thought

Animal health management is shifting from disease treatment to resilience building. The most successful operations are no longer asking: "How do we treat disease?"

Instead, they're asking: "How do we help animals handle stress without getting sick?"

The answer begins in the gut—and supporting it year-round is one of the most practical and impactful recommendations retailers can offer.

Once the Gut Weakens:

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- **Pathogens gain an advantage**
- **Performance suffers**

NEW PRODUCTS

SMART GRIT™

Smart Grit is an all-natural, plant-based poultry grit that goes beyond basic granite by incorporating Ahiflower® "stone seeds" to aid in feed breakdown and support digestion. Rich in naturally occurring calcium, it helps promote stronger eggshells in laying hens and contributes to balanced gut function across all classes of poultry.

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