

Indigestible plastic bags are hindering profitability of dairy production in peri-urban Kampala

Abstract

The readily available market for milk and its products is the driver for the thriving peri-urban dairy farming in Uganda. However, the farmers involved are faced with limited space and feed resource which restricts them to small herds of dairy cattle. In addition, the peri-urban areas are contaminated with indigestible materials such as plastic bags which once consumed by the cattle impair their health, causes loss of milk productivity and death. This report documents the findings from three cases referred to the ambulatory clinic at the Central Diagnostic Laboratory (CDL) in 2018. The cases were diagnosed as hardware disease and surgically treated by rumenotomy. In addition, a review of the patients' data sheets in CDL was performed to identify other cases of hardware disease documented in 2018. Both metallic and non-metallic indigestible materials were recovered from the rumen and reticulum of the three animals operated. The indigestible foreign materials included nails, wire, plastic bags and a sisal rope. The common clinical signs coherent with the presence of indigestible materials were chronic emaciation and loss of appetite. The review of the patients' data sheets showed that blood samples of 23 other cases of suspected hardware disease were submitted to CDL 2018 for diagnosis. It is paramount that farmers are sensitized about the effects of indigestible materials on the production of dairy animals. For, such an intervention would liberate the peri-urban dairy farmers from the losses attributed to hardware disease.

Keywords; Hardware disease, Ingested plastic bags, Peri-urban dairy farming, Uganda

1.1. Introduction

Hardware disease is a dreaded disease condition of cattle and other ruminants that occurs primarily as a result of the ruminant's inability to select feed during prehension [1]. Hence, ruminants will inadvertently swallow any indigestible materials availed within the feeds. Following the ingestion, the effects vary depending on the type of material and localization within the ruminants' fore stomachs [2]. Sharp objects such as nails and wires are hurtful

29 because they can pierce the wall of the esophagus causing trauma and pain during swallowing
30 [3,4]. Once ingested, the metallic objects often lodge in the reticulum. In adverse circumstances,
31 the wire or nail penetrates the wall of the reticulum and pericardium causing peritonitis,
32 pericarditis, pleuritis and death. On the other hand, partial penetration into the wall of the
33 reticulum may occur resulting into wall thickening, fibrin deposition and indigestion. Invariably,
34 the effects following ingestion of non-metallic materials manifest after a prolonged period of
35 time, after they have accumulated. Up to 55 kg have been surgically recovered from the cattle
36 rumen [1]. Of which the most commonly recovered non-metallic indigestible materials include
37 plastic bags, ropes and clothes [1]. The sequelae for consumption of non-metallic foreign
38 material include reduced feed intake, bloat, rumen impaction, nutritional deficiencies and
39 deprivation [3]. Since the buildup may take weeks to months; at the time of diagnosis, the
40 prognosis of such an animal is guarded.

41 The diagnosis of hardware disease is rather complex because it relies more on the clinical history
42 and observation rather than laboratory diagnosis [4–6]. Although the use of radiography and
43 ultrasonography eases the clinician's duty, non-metallic materials are hardly detectable [7,8]. On
44 a lighter note, the diagnosis of hardware disease involving metallic objects is easier because the
45 cardinal signs are easily detectable. These include arching of the back, groaning, abnormal gait
46 and intolerance to locomotion, which are easy to observe [9].

47 One could say that hardware disease affects cattle reared under intensive management systems
48 such as zero grazing and feedlot [1]. This accrues from the fact that feeds for intensively
49 managed cattle undergo various steps of harvest, processing and storage which exposes them to
50 indigestible foreign materials. This is even much more likely for poor nations because the feeds
51 utilized commonly are the locally available crop residues derived from food processing in
52 homesteads and market places [10]. In addition the cattle are supplemented with cut and carry
53 pasture from nearby unconstructed plots or swamps, brewers waste, hay and silage.

54 Although this system is perfect for the land-constrained peri-urban farmers, daunting challenges
55 that include low-grade feeds, animal welfare concerns and diseases such as laminitis, infertility
56 and hardware disease accompany this type of system [11]. Previous studies [11–13] have
57 reported on infertility and managerial constraints. However, hardware disease remained
58 neglected despite being a very serious problem to the farmers in Uganda. Therefore this article is

59 the first to document the occurrence of hardware disease and point out its implications on dairy
60 production in Uganda.

61

62 **1.2. Materials and methods**

63 *1.2.1. Cases description*

64 All the cases involved in this report were referred to the ambulatory clinic at Central Diagnostic
65 Laboratory (CDL) by extension officers following persistent degeneration of the cattle despite
66 completing the prescribed treatment regimen. After receiving the case, details captured were
67 entered into a case file at CDL. Subsequently, a resident clinician was dispatched to visit the
68 farm, collect history, thoroughly examine the sick animal and its environment, and to collect
69 blood and fecal samples from the animal when necessary. The clinical history collected included
70 the age, breed, sex, management system, and onset of clinical symptoms and the record of the
71 previous treatments given. The clinical examination information included the weight, body
72 condition score and measuring the rectal temperature.

73 *1.2.2. Surgical procedure*

74 Following the diagnosis, discussions were held with the farmers to decide on the necessary
75 actions which included either surgery or culling off the animal. Once consent was obtained to
76 perform surgery, a stay suture rumenotomy was performed as described previously [14]. Briefly,
77 the animal was restrained and the left para-lumbar fossa area was shaved and disinfected with
78 cotton soaked in Iodine tincture. A 2% lidocaine hydrochloride local anaesthetic solution was
79 infused at the site in an inverted-L pattern. A 15-20 cm incision was made at the center of the
80 para-lumbar fossa, approximately 10cm on the posterior end, parallel to the contour of the last
81 rib. The external oblique, internal oblique and the transversus abdominis muscles were incised
82 bluntly to expose the peritoneum, which was opened initially by making a stab incision to permit
83 pressure balance within the abdominal cavity. The wall of the rumen was thoroughly inspected
84 for any adhesions by making a gentle sweep using the surgeon's hand covered with sterile arm
85 length gloves. After examination, an incision was made into the rumen to expose the ingesta,
86 followed by exploration of the ingesta for plastic bags and other indigestible materials. A magnet

87 was used to make a gentle sweep to attract any metallic indigestible materials within the rumen
88 and the reticulum.

89 ***1.2.3. Closure of the incision and post-operative care***

90 The incision was then closed as follows; the rumen was closed using two layers of inverting
91 simple continuous suture patterns with chromic catgut suture material (chromisorb[®], USP 2-0).
92 The peritoneum and the transversus abdominis muscle were closed with catgut suture material
93 using a simple interrupted pattern. The external and internal oblique muscles were closed with
94 chromic catgut using a simple continuous suture pattern. The subcutis was then closed with
95 polyglactin 910 (Vicryl[®], 1) using a simple continuous pattern and finally, the skin was apposed
96 with nylon suture material (NYLON MONOFILAMNT[®], USP 2) using a horizontal mattress
97 suture pattern. Post-operative care included intramuscular injections of Pen-Strep[®] and
98 multivitamin (Norbrook Laboratories, Newry, North Ireland) at the recommended dosage q.d. for
99 3 days. Whereas an Alamycin[®] wound spray was applied q.a.d. until the patient recovered.
100 Patients whose health conditions were dire received 300 ml of propylene glycol per os, q.d. for 3
101 days.

102 ***1.2.4. Retrospective review of cases reported to CDL in 2018 following suspicion of hardware*** 103 ***disease***

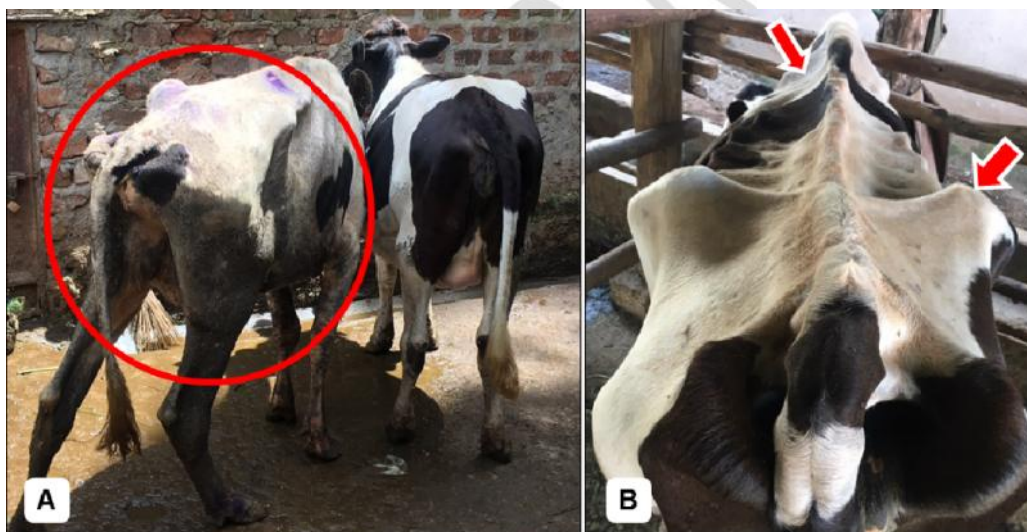
104 Prompted by the findings from the 3 cattle operated, a retrospective review of all the blood
105 samples submitted to the hematology unit in 2018 was performed. Information was obtained
106 from the forms where the submitter indicated hardware disease as the suspected disease. The
107 information captured included the date, district, breed, age, sex, clinical signs and the diseases
108 suspected. The data was packaged into excel and presented in tabular form.

109 **1.3. Results**

110 **1.3.1. Clinical findings**

111 Case 1 was for a tethered cow found in Wakiso district. Based on the history, the cow was
112 reported to the extension officer with signs of emaciation, reduced appetite and teeth grinding
113 (Table 1). She was dewormed and injected with antibiotics, anti-trypanosome, and anti-protozoa
114 drugs. However the condition persisted prompting a referral.

115 Case 2 was for a 5 year old zero grazed cow from a herd of 5 animals in Kasangati, Wakiso
116 district. From the information collected, she had suffered for at least 8 months before the surgery
117 was performed (Fig. 1). Similarly to case 1, she was treated for helminthiasis, trypanosomiasis
118 and anaplasmosis. Despite the treatment, her condition worsened prompting the farmer to
119 involve another extension worker who also attempted more treatment regimen before referring
120 the case to CDL for rumenotomy.



121

122 **Figure 1:** The affected emaciated animals following suspected ingestion of indigestible
123 materials. The red circle in Image A shows the suspected case in proximity to a healthy animal.
124 The red arrows in image B shows the protruding bone prominences of the animal with an
125 indigestible material.

126

127 Case 3 was for a 2 year old bull found on a paddocked farm of 14 cattle, in Wakiso district. At
128 the time of the visit the bull had a normal rectal temperature but was severely emaciated. Only
129 two weeks ago, it had a fever and received treatment against anaplasmosis and theileriosis, after
130 which his demeanor and appetite improved for only 2 days before reverting to solitude, lethargy
131 and staggering gait. Congruent to hardware disease diagnosis, the farmer reported having lost a
132 heifer 4 months ago under similar circumstances. Upon slaughter, the heifer was found with
133 plenty of plastic bags in the rumen. Affirmatively, the visiting veterinarian observed several
134 plastic bags littered all over the pasture. When the veterinarian raised the concern, the farmer
135 responded that “they (plastic bags) were blown by wind from the plastic bag recycling factory
136 neighboring the farm”.

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UNDER PEER REVIEW

139 **Table 1: The descriptive data for the positive cases of foreign material handled by the Ambulatory clinic at CDL**

Case ID	Date	Location:	Management system	Characteristics: Breed, Age, Sex	History	Clinical parameters: wt, BCS, Temp,	Indigestible materials
Case 1: 18-2545	April/ 2018	Wakiso	Tethering	Holstein Friesian 4 years Female	Innapetence Weight loss Lethargy Non responsive to treatment	254 kg 1.5 39.6 ⁰ C	Plastic bags Nail
Case 2: 18-2145	May/ 2018	Wakiso	Zero grazing	Holstein Friesian 5 years Female	Innapetence Weight loss Persistent watery diarrhea Non responsive to treatment	239 kg 1.5 39.3 ⁰ C	Plastic bags Sisal rope Wire
Case 3: 18-2715	Nov/2018	Wakiso	Paddocking	Holstein Friesian 2 years Male	Weight loss Intermittent fever Mild response to treatment Mucous on the feces Lack of appetite	172 kg N/A 39.5 ⁰ C 0	Plastic bags Wire

140 Wt: weight in kilo grams, BCS: Body condition score on a scale of 5, temp: Temperature in degrees centigrade

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144 **1.3.2. Indigestible contents retrieved after surgery**

145 Plastic bags and a nail were removed from the rumen and reticulum of the animal in case 1 (Fig.
146 2). In case 2, plastic bags, a sisal rope and a wire were retrieved from the rumen (Fig.2). Notably,
147 one end of the rope was entwined into a ball like structure which was lodged in the reticulum. In
148 case 3, plastic bags were found in the rumen while a 5 cm long nail was retrieved from the
149 reticulum. Among the animals operated, case 1 recovered and regained productivity while the
150 other two animals (Cases 2 and 3) died 7-10 days after surgery.

151



152

153 **Figure 2:** Indigestible materials that include plastic bags, rope, and wire that were retrieved
154 from the rumen and reticulum of the affected cattle. The red arrow shows the metallic wire
155 removed from the reticulum of the animal in case 2.

156

157 **1.3.3. Other cases reported to CDL following suspicion of hardware disease**

158 In total, 23 suspected cases were reported to the Central Diagnostic Laboratory for diagnosis of
159 hardware disease in the year 2018 (Table 2). Majority, 82% (19/23) were submitted from the
160 Kampala and neighboring districts Wakiso and Mukono while the other 4 cases came from
161 further districts such as Luweero, Nakaseke and Sembabule. Regarding the breed, Holstein
162 Friesian was the most dominant contributing 87% (20/23) to the total sample while one Jersey
163 and 2 Ankole samples were also submitted. All the farmers included emaciation as the most

164 common clinical feature attributed with hardware disease followed by starry hair coat, lethargy
165 and diarrhea. The rarely reported clinical signs in the current report included submandibular
166 edema, arched back and recumbence. Among the 23 cases, 8 cases recorded hardware disease
167 solely as the suspected disease while the rest recorded it with other diseases such as
168 helminthiasis, fascioliasis, hemoparasites, para-tuberculosis (Johnes' disease) and coccidioisis.

169

UNDER PEER REVIEW

170 **Table 2: The description of cases submitted to the Hematology unit at CDL in the year 2018, following suspicion of Hardware**
 171 **disease**

S/N	Date	District	Breed	Age	Sex	Clinical signs reported	Diseases suspected
1	Jan	Kampala	HF	Adult	F	Emaciation, severe diarrhea	HD
2	April	Wakiso	HF	Adult	F	Emaciation, anorexia, lacrimation, rectal temp: 38.2 ⁰ C	HD
3	April	Kampala	HF	Adult	F	Emaciation, lethargy, rectal temp: 40.1 ⁰ C	Hemoparasites, HD
4	April	Wakiso	HF	Adult	F	Emaciation, starry hair coat	Hemoparasites, HD
5	May	Wakiso	HF	NA	M	Emaciation	HD
6	May	Nakaseke	Ankole	Heifer	F	Emaciation, anorexia, rectal temp: 39.0 ⁰ C	HD, Hemoparasites
7	May	Wakiso	HF	Adult	F	Emaciation, starry hair coat, agalactia	HD, Helminthiasis
8	May	Luweero	HF	Adult	F	Emaciation, starry hair coat	HD
9	June	Sembabule	Ankole	Adult	F	Persistent diarrhea	HD
10	June	Wakiso	HF	NA	F	Emaciation, starry hair coat, hatched back, diarrhea	Helminthiasis, HD
11	July	Nakaseke	HF	Adult	F	Progressive emaciation	HD, Hemoparasites
12	July	Kampala	HF	Adult	F	Emaciation, innapetence, agalactia, rectal temp: 39.5 ⁰ C	Hemoparasites, HD
13	July	Mukono	Jersey	Adult	F	Emaciation, starry hair coat, chronic diarrhea, rectal temp: 41.8 ⁰ C	HD, Paratuberculosis
14	July	Wakiso	HF	Yearling	M	Emaciation, diarrhea, recumbence	Coccidiosis, HD
15	July	Wakiso	HF	Adult	F	Emaciation, lethargy, agalactia	Hemoparasites, HD
16	Aug	Wakiso	HF	Heifer	M	Emaciation, lethargy, rectal temp: 39.5	HD
17	Aug	Kampala	HF	Adult	F	Emaciation, recumbence, innapetence, submandibular edema	HD, Hemoparasites
18	Oct	Wakiso	HF	NA	F	Emaciation, reluctant to move, starry hair coat	Fascioliasis, HD
19	Oct	Wakiso	HF	Adult	F	Emaciation, selective feeding, mild diarrhea, rectal temp: 38.9	HD
20	Oct	Mukono	HF	Heifer	F	Emaciation, lethargy, starry hair coat	Fascioliasis, HD
21	Nov	Wakiso	HF	Adult	F	Emaciation, submandibular edema	Helminthiasis, HD
22	Nov	Wakiso	HF	Adult	F	Severe emaciation	Helminthiasis, HD
23	Nov	Mukono	HF	Adult	F	Emaciation, selective feeding, labored breathing	HD

172 HD: Hardware disease, HF: Holstein Friesian, temp: Temperature in degrees centigrade

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175 **1.4. Discussion**

176 The availability of market for milk coupled with logistical support from the government and
177 other Non-governmental organizations have fostered the peri-urban dairy farming in Uganda
178 [11,15]. However, the peri-urban farmers have to cope with limited space and feeds scarcity.
179 Adaptively, the farmers utilize crop residues (Fig. 3) from sources that include homes, markets
180 and food processing plants to feed the animals [10]. Unfortunately, the chain of processing that
181 such feed goes through inescapably subjects it to contamination with plastic bags, metals and
182 chemicals.

183



184

185 **Figure 3:** Crop residues used to feed cattle including banana peelings and potato peelings. The
186 red arrows in Image C show the plastic bags found in the feed trough at one of the farms visited.

187 In Uganda, plastic bag pollution is rampant. In recent years, the use of plastic bags has been
188 condemned and almost banned due to the environmental pollution, soils degradation and public
189 health concerns posed [16]. None the less, the attempts to ban plastic bags have failed due to bad
190 political influence and business interests [17]. Currently, over 40 plants continue to import and
191 distribute over 2,000 tons of plastic bags into Uganda per year [18]. Sadly, this occurs without a
192 nationwide plastic bag recollection strategy leading to unchecked pollution of the water, soil and
193 the pastures [19,20]. Withstanding, the implications of plastic bags waste on livestock production
194 remains concealed. To date, no record documents plastic bag effects on livestock production in
195 Uganda and yet subjective evidence suggests it is a growing concern. This article provides

196 baseline data regarding the effect of plastic bags on cattle among dairy farms in the peri-urban
197 Kampala.

198 In this report, referral cases reported to the ambulatory unit of the Central Diagnostic Laboratory
199 (CDL) were diagnosed and surgically treated. Indigestible materials such as plastic bags, rope,
200 wire and nails (Fig.1) were recovered from the rumen and reticulum of the animals involved in
201 the current study. The indigestible materials found were familiar with those reported in previous
202 studies conducted in Ethiopia [21] and Tanzania [2]. Furthermore, those studies reported a
203 prevalence of indigestible materials in cattle to be 24 and 13 % in Tanzania and Ethiopia,
204 respectively. Since the livestock production systems may not differ much from those in
205 neighboring Ethiopia and Tanzania, we could speculate that the prevalence of indigestible
206 materials among cattle reared in Uganda is equally high. Concordantly, a retrospective search
207 through the archives for samples recorded by the hematology unit by CDL in 2018 showed that
208 23 other cases were submitted for blood chemistry analysis over suspicions of indigestible
209 materials (Table 2). Certainly the burden of indigestible materials in Uganda is worrying and
210 compels a further study to determine its prevalence.

211 Of the three animals operated, two were female Holstein Friesians in productive stage while the
212 other was a young male yet to attain its reproductive purpose. Regrettably, two of the animals
213 died following surgery. The death could be blamed on the fact that at the time of the surgical
214 intervention, they were in poor body condition and emaciated due to indigestible material
215 induced nutrient deprivation [22]. A previous study [1] has shown that non-metallic indigestible
216 materials have the ability to cause ruminal stasis and impaction of the reticulum-abomasum
217 orifice thence impairing digestion.

218 Excruciatingly, the diagnosis of the plastic bag intake is complex and requires sophisticated
219 equipment such as an ultra sound machine, X-ray machine and metal detectors which may not be
220 readily available in developing countries [9]. As such by the time one realizes that the animals
221 could be suffering from plastic bag intake, the animal has suffered severely and it is at the blink
222 of death. For instance, the three cases in this report were first misdiagnosed and treated for other
223 diseases and conditions that include helminthiasis, trypanosomiasis and anaplasmosis before
224 suspecting an indigestible material.

225 Taken together, plastic bags and other indigestible materials impart heavy production losses and
226 ill-health implications on the dairy sector [23]. In the long run, this contradicts the purpose of the
227 peri-urban farming to provide milk for nourishment and also to generate income. Regrettably, the
228 plastic bags pollution in Uganda is startling due to poor solid waste disposal manners among the
229 city dwellers, lack of government aided rigorous systematic processes to recollect the used
230 plastic bag or to ban plastic bag use [24].

231 The findings of this study suggest a need to sensitize the farmers on proper sorting of the feeds to
232 avoid exposing their cattle to indigestible materials. Even though the zero grazed animals are
233 more prone to suffer from the consumption of plastic bags, it is common to find free ranging
234 cattle scavenging from open rubbish dumping sites in the peri-urban areas (Fig. 4). The driver for
235 such a behavior could be the nutritional deficiency of the feeds provided, taste of the contents in
236 the plastic bags or just curiosity [5]. However, the outcome for such cattle may be death.
237 Therefore, the municipal councils need to take the initiative to fence off the dumping sites.



238
239 **Figure 4:** A cow scavenging for feed from a garbage dumping site near a grazing area in
240 Kampala.

241
242 **Conclusion**

243 In summary, indigestible materials such as plastic bags pose a serious threat to the realization of
244 the anticipated profit margin for the peri-urban dairy farmers. The farmers incur losses through
245 low milk production, cost of surgery and treatment, and death of their cattle. Therefore, doing
246 nothing to reduce the exposure of dairy cattle to indigestible material condemns the peri-urban

247 dairy farmers into poverty. As a proposed countermeasure, awareness of farmers coupled with
248 increased vigilance of the population towards plastic bag use is required to reduce hardware
249 disease and its effects on the eco, human and animal health in the urban and peri-urban centers.

250

251 **Conflict of Interest**

252 None to declare

253

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