

Lambing

Information Sheet

Joint ill in lambs



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Joint-ill is a recurring problem at lambing time and a variety of different bacteria can cause problems. *Streptococcus dysgalactiae* is capable of causing major outbreaks in lambs even where hygiene and management appear to be good. Few lambs die but up to 15% can be affected. Many of these are left permanently lame and as a result are difficult or impossible to finish meaning both welfare and economic costs can be high.

Affected lambs are often 1-3 weeks of age and are lame and reluctant to move. They may look empty. If more than one leg is affected they can struggle to stand. Any limb joints can be affected, (commonly the knee and hock), and may feel hot. Swelling of the joint may not be immediately obvious but can develop with time. Lack of use causes the muscles of the affected leg to waste. Infection of the joint between the skull and the spine can also occur and these lambs are found down and unable to rise.

The sacrifice and postmortem of one or more untreated lambs may be necessary to reach a diagnosis particularly if response to treatment is poor. Many isolates of *S. dysgalactiae* are resistant to oxytetracycline antibiotics.

Treatment should be discussed with your vet and is successful only if cases are identified early. The lambs should be separated, together with the ewe, so that they are easy to identify, monitor and treat on a daily basis. A suitable antibiotic, e.g. penicillin, should be given for 5-10 days. Haphazard treatment depending on time and whether or not the lamb can be caught will fail. Pain relief can be useful making it easier for the lamb to move around and keep up with the ewe. For badly affected lambs, and those that fail to respond to treatment, euthanasia may be the best option.

It can be difficult to decide why outbreaks occur. Initial infection is likely to be through the mouth, although entry via the navel is a possibility. *S. dysgalactiae* has been identified on the teats and within the vagina of ewes from affected flocks suggesting that lambs may come into contact with the bacteria during birth or at their first feed.

Gloves should always be worn when assisting ewes to lamb. Good practice in relation to navel treatment and colostrum management is essential and individual pens should be disinfected and re-bedded after each use as the bacteria survives on hay or straw for several weeks. Anecdotally there may be a link between outbreaks of joint ill and the early ear tagging of lambs but this has not been proved. Tagging should be carried out in dry, hygienic conditions and any equipment used for new born lambs, such as stomach tubes and teats, sterilised after each use. Following discussion with your vet antibiotic treatment of all newborn lambs may have to be tried to control an outbreak. This is not guaranteed to prevent further cases and the other steps listed above should also be put in place.

