

Lambing

Information Sheet

Preventing Infection in Newborn Lambs



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Every spring large numbers of lambs fall ill and many die from preventable bacterial infections such as watery mouth, navel ill, liver abscesses, meningitis and scours. Other conditions such as joint ill lead to poor lamb welfare. Bacteria infect lambs mainly through the navel or via the mouth. Attention to detail will improve lamb survival rates and reduce time and money spent treating sick lambs. If significant losses occur or treatment appears to be ineffective submit the carcasses of typical cases to your local SAC Disease Surveillance Centre for post-mortem examination.

Environment Lambs encounter bacteria during and immediately after birth. These cannot be eliminated but you can reduce the numbers that they are exposed to. A lamb seeking a teat will take bacteria into its mouth from the udder and fleece. Dry bedding and clipping will keep ewes cleaner and reduce this risk. Extra bedding may be needed if wet silage is being fed. A good guide to whether more bedding is needed is that your own knees should remain dry while kneeling down. Lame ewes should be separated and treated as they are another source of bacteria that can infect lambs. Uneaten feeds such as silage should be cleared away daily as it also poses an infection risk. Single pens should be cleaned and disinfected between ewes. Stocking densities should not be too high.

Navels A wet navel provides a direct route for bacteria to travel into the lamb. The navel should be treated as soon as possible after birth and ideally again 6 hours later. Tincture of Iodine is the best product to use as it will dry the navel and has an antiseptic effect. It is important to dip the entire navel. Keep your container of Iodine clean. Dipping navels will introduce bacteria, straw and faeces into the solution. When the volume gets low tip out any remaining contents and start afresh by cleaning the bottle and refilling it rather than continually topping it up. Iodine is not expensive – doing this at least every 24 hours is better than risking passing infection from lamb to lamb.

Colostrum Lambs are born without any antibodies and rely on the high levels present in colostrum for immunity against infection. The antibodies are absorbed from the intestine during the first few hours of life and all lambs must receive a good feed in this time. Lambs that do not receive colostrum have a high risk of death. Ewe nutrition and condition score need to be right for them to produce adequate colostrum. Weak, triplet and rejected lambs are among those that will need supplemented. They require 50ml/kg or around 250ml for a twin lamb ideally within 2 hours of birth. Use ewe colostrum wherever possible. Powdered or cow colostrum may be more convenient but will not provide as much energy. The volume of cow colostrum used can be increased by up to 50% for this reason. Frozen colostrum should be gently thawed in warm water to avoid destroying the antibodies. Very occasionally cow colostrum can cause a fatal anaemia in lambs. Your local SAC Disease Surveillance Centre can test colostrum before use to make sure it is safe. Remember that it is not safe to stomach tube lambs that are unable to hold up their heads - they will not swallow the tube and the milk will enter their lungs.

Sick lambs, hygiene and equipment Sick lambs especially if scoured should be isolated to avoid spread of bacteria. Take care to prevent the transfer of infections on hands, clothing and equipment including warming boxes, bottles and stomach tubes. Items for use with newborn lambs can be sterilised e.g. with Miltons sterilising fluid.

Vaccinations Clostridial vaccines given to the ewes 4-6 weeks pre-lambing will protect against lamb dysentery provided the lambs receive enough colostrum. Check that the vaccine used includes the correct components to protect young lambs. If in doubt ask your vet to advise.

Antibiotics Dosing every lamb with antibiotics at birth is not ideal. However this approach does have its place especially where there is an on going problem and lamb welfare is an issue. They should only be used in conjunction with all other possible measures to limit bacterial build up.

Visit www.fas.scot for further information or contact the helpline on 0300 323 0161, or by email at advice@fas.scot