

SHEEP LAMENESS: THE FIVE POINT PLAN

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From contagious ovine digital dermatitis (CODD) to footrot, managing sheep lameness on farm can feel like a never-ending battle. The cost of lameness extends further than the obvious losses through culling, with two thirds of antibiotic usage in sheep thought to be due to lameness as well as the negative impacts on welfare and public perception. Following a few simple steps we can aim to reduce culling and ultimately create a more productive and healthy flock. The following is a summary of the five point plan based on the AHDB recommendations.

Cull

Genetic susceptibility has a role to play in scald and footrot. Sheep that have chronic or repeated outbreaks of lameness should be culled from the flock. This will reduce the spread of disease both by eliminating the genetic lines that have more susceptibility to lameness and decreasing the disease burden on farm. This means there will be less sheep spreading contagious pathogens causing both CODD and footrot.

Quarantine

Biosecurity and quarantine are extremely important to preventing the entry of new pathogens on farm. All sheep being brought onto the farm should be quarantined for a minimum of 28 days in a yard/shed separate from the main flock. Whilst in quarantine the sheep should be foot-bathed three times at 5 day intervals with 10% zinc sulphate or 3% formalin. Quarantine should also be used for any animals within the flock that have been identified as lame, separating them will help stop the spread of pathogens to others.

Quarantine is just as important in the control of parasites and other diseases!!

Tips for bringing new sheep onto farm: check every sheep for early signs of disease, treat all cases quickly and effectively, ensure any transport is properly cleaned and disinfected between batches, try and buy from flocks with strict lameness protocols, seek veterinary advice if you have any concerns.

Treat

Regularly checking stock ensures prompt treatment to any health issues that may be occurring. All lame sheep should be examined and treated, even though showing very mild lameness. Catching lame sheep early in the disease process allows for a more successful outcome as the severity of damage caused to the foot and spread of disease to other members of the flock will be minimised.

Correctly diagnosing the cause of lameness means we can provide the best treatment plan. The foot should be cleaned to allow any lesions to be clearly visualised. Once correct diagnosis has been made, we can start treatment. Trimming feet is very rarely useful for the treatment of lame sheep as it often results in delayed healing and aids the spread of infectious pathogens. Below are some common presentations of lameness and a treatment plan:

Footrot and scald

Presentation - Red/pink inflamed area between claws, foul smelling horn with possible pus and hoof wall separation

Treatment - If the horn is not involved, clean and apply antibiotic spray as well as foot-bathing in 10% zinc sulphate or 3% formalin

If horn is involved treat as above plus antibiotic injection should be used, alongside pain relief



CODD

Presentation - Lesion starts at top of hoof and works downwards ultimately resulting in hoof detachment

Treatment - Antibiotic injection alongside pain relief

Abscess

Presentation - Often due to separation at white line, foot can look normal but appear hot/painful.

Treatment - Draining the abscess then covering with topical antibiotic spray, plus antibiotic injection alongside pain relief

Toe granuloma

Presentation - Painful red tissue swelling from the point of the toe

Treatment - Pain relief and antibiotics if there looks to be infection.

Impacted dirt, stones and trauma to the foot or leg should not be forgotten about as other causes of lameness.

Discussion should be had with your vet about the most appropriate antibiotic to use. Many products are not licenced for use in sheep lameness, your vet can give you the most up to date advice.

Marking and recording the tag of any lame or treated sheep means you can be aware of any repeat and chronic cases that may need culling.

Avoid

If diseases could be completely avoided this would make our job very easy. However, this is not the reality. But steps can be taken to minimise the development and spread of lameness lesions. Grazing management can often play a crucial role in this, with many of the pathogens causing lameness preferring wet and muddy areas, moving troughs and feeders around can prevent poaching as well as avoiding overusing gateways. Having a separate field for lame sheep is also important as it will prevent build up of bacteria where the main flock is grazing.

Following on from this at housing bedding should be kept as dry as possible and again separating lame sheep to a quarantine pen is always useful. Regular foot-bathing should also be carried out, but care must be taken to have the solution at the correct concentration, depth and exposure time. You should also allow the sheep on dry standing for the product to work effectively, these will all vary depending on the product being used so be sure to check labels or give us a ring.

Vaccinate

The good news is, there is a vaccine to help with lameness!! Footvax can be used to both treat and prevent footrot. It stimulates immunity to the bacteria causing footrot, meaning it can aid in treating outbreaks. With footrot also being one of the main risk factors for development of CODD lesions, vaccination can also reduce the number of CODD cases seen on farm. The vaccination requires six monthly boosters to be effective, but this should not be administered in the run up to shearing due to some sheep having reaction lumps which could cause trauma at shearing. Care should be taken also to not dose around lambing time to minimise stress to the ewes. It should also be noted that the vaccine reacts with the anthelmintic moxidectin 1%.

Using a combination of the topics discussed in this article we can help to increase your flocks resilience to the causes of lameness and reduce disease challenge on your farm.

Don't hesitate to get in contact with us if you'd like any further information regarding your lameness.

AHWP funding is available and can be used to investigate lameness alongside the required anthelmintic resistance.

To start, you will have to register for the review through the government website. If eligible, you will receive an application link. Prior to applying, please speak to your vet, as the visit needs to be completed six months after applying.

<https://apply-for-an-annual-health-and-welfare-review.defra.gov.uk/apply/register-your-interest>

Register here:

