Scald in lambs

The most common causes of lameness in sheep in England are scald and footrot, with contagious ovine digital dermatitis (CODD) also becoming an increasing problem on many farms. Scald is now thought to be an early form of footrot and is caused by the same bacteria (Fusobacterium necrophorum). Scald causes the skin between the claws to become red/pink due to inflammation with a pasty ‘scum’ on the top and may have a smell. Infection is thought to occur through damage to the sensitive skin area between the claws caused by abrasion (damage from thistles, hard and stalky grass, hedge trimming etc) or by prolonged exposure to moisture that causes the skin to soften. Controlling footrot in ewes is known to reduce the incidence of scald in their lambs.

At this time of year, scald in growing lambs can severely reduce daily liveweight gain resulting in lighter lambs. Their feed conversion rates decrease as they get older meaning they could take longer and cost more to finish. Lame lambs are less likely to feed and graze making them more susceptible to disease.

Diagnosis

Ensuring the correct diagnosis of foot problems will result in more effective treatment. It is important to treat sheep as soon as possible, preferably within three days of diagnosis. Delays in treatment risks the disease spreading which will lead to a reduction in lamb performance. If not treated quickly scald may lead to footrot, so it is important to treat promptly once you suspect a problem.

Treatment

If there are only a few affected animals it may be practical to catch individuals and treat the foot with antibiotic spray. However, if more animals are affected it might be a better use of time to gather the flock and run them through a footbath. It’s important to avoid the temptation to run lambs with scald through an antibiotic footbath as this should be reserved for treatment of conditions that require antibiotics, such as CODD. Instead use formalin or zinc sulphate-based products. Always read the label and use at the recommended concentrations, plus follow these guidelines:

Formalin – run lambs through (no need to stand in it) use correct concentration (3-4%) and allow sheep to stand on hard standing for a minimum of 30 minutes to allow the product to dry.

Zinc sulphate – lambs need to stand for 15-20 minutes in the product.

Footbaths should be in a good condition, with adequate holding pens. Treatment works best when feet are clean. If possible, a footbath full of water leading up to the footbath of product would help clean the foot and enable more of the product to make contact with the hoof. This is particularly important if using a formalin-based product as the efficiency is reduced with the presence of organic matter. Once lambs have been through the footbath turn them out onto dry, hard standing for a minimum of 30 minutes and, if possible, turn them onto pasture that hasn’t had sheep on it for ten days.

Poor facilities may lead to scald spreading between lambs when gathering them in close proximity. Consider applying lime to common areas that lambs come into contact with, for example feed troughs, water troughs and gateways, to avoid spreading the bacteria.

For more information see the Better Returns Programme Manual, Reducing Lameness for Better Returns

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Information is also available on the AHDB Beef & Lamb website beefandlamb.ahdb.org.uk.

AHDB Beef & Lamb is a division of the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (AHDB)