



Disease of Newborn Lambs

Watery Mouth Disease (Rattle belly, Watery belly)

This disease is caused by the growth and toxin release of *E. coli* in the gut of newborn lambs. The bacteria are picked up by the lamb by suckling dirty teats, wool or daggings on the ewe, or ingestion of environmental contamination. It can also be introduced by people either putting dirty fingers in the lambs' mouths or sharing stomach tubes between sick and newborn lambs.

The clinical signs can be initially subtle, the lamb may have a cold mouth and be reluctant to suckle or stand. Affected animals can quickly deteriorate with profuse salivation, bloated abdomen and lethargy, often leading to coma and death.

Risk factors for this disease are reduced or delayed colostrum intake, mismothering, difficult births, multiples, ewes with poor colostrum production.

Diagnosis is generally made on clinical signs, though if there is an unexpectedly high number of cases on farm then some lambs should be submitted for post-mortem to ensure that nothing else is going on.

Treatment includes gentle warming, oral rehydration, despite the bloated appearance of the belly. An electrolyte solution should be given by stomach tube four times daily at 50ml/kg. Soapy water enemas can be useful in the early stages if the lamb is struggling to pass the meconium. Antibiotics may be useful in certain situations – please speak to a vet for advice on this.

Preventative measures are most important and the best way to prevent and/or reduce watery mouth cases is to maximise both the quality of the colostrum and the speed at which the lamb receives it.

- Ensure ewes are in good condition and are receiving the correct nutrition prior to and during lambing time
- Ensure lambs receive enough colostrum within the first two hours of life – if not suckled themselves then supplement by bottle or stomach tube. They should receive 50ml/kg (e.g. 250ml for a 5kg lamb)

- This should be repeated if the lamb needs help to ensure an intake of 200ml/kg within the first 24h of life (e.g. 1L for a 5kg lamb)
- Lots of things can be done to improve the cleanliness of your lambing environment such as cleaning out pens between ewes, using disinfectants such as lime powder and topping up clean bedding as necessary.

Navel ill (Umbilical infection)

Navel ill occurs when bacteria enter the body through the umbilical cord shortly after birth. This can lead to abscess formation within the body wall and can quickly progress to affect the joints and abdominal organs.

The clinical signs are often seen in lambs less than two weeks old. Initially lambs present with a warm, moist, swollen navel and show signs of pain. As the condition progresses lambs appear dull, hunched and depressed with a poor body condition. They have an empty, gaunt appearance and are easily caught in the field.

Risk factors include inadequate navel treatment, reduced or delayed colostrum intake, mismothering, difficult births, multiples, ewes with poor colostrum production and poor environmental hygiene. It is more common during poor weather and in male lambs because urination delays drying of the umbilicus and removes some of the iodine solution.

Diagnosis is generally made on clinical signs, though if there is an unexpectedly high number of cases on farm then some lambs should be submitted for post-mortem to ensure that nothing else is going on.

Treatment is often unsuccessful in these cases, unless caught very early on in the disease process. Intense supportive care with fluids and electrolytes is necessary alongside veterinary advice on the use of appropriate antibiotic and anti-inflammatory.

Preventative measures are most important and the best way to prevent and/or reduce navel ill. One key step in reducing navel ill is to dip all navels in 10% iodine within 15 minutes of birth and repeat every 2-4 hours until the navel has completely dried-up. Environmental hygiene and colostrum management also play a key role.

Joint ill

Joint-ill is a joint infection commonly caused by the bacteria *Streptococcus dysgalactiae*. The disease occurs in both indoor and outdoor lambing flocks, and a survey from 2020 suggests that joint-ill in lambs is found on 64% of UK sheep farms.

Clinical signs are often associated with lameness. Pain and swelling in one or more joints is a common feature and if the spine is affected, lambs may be unable to stand. The number of infected joints varies; only one joint is affected in approximately 50 per cent of lambs with two to four joints in the remainder. The joints most commonly affected are the carpus (the “knee” on the front leg), hock, fetlock, and stifle joints. Affected lambs will also have reduced growth rate.

Risk factors for this disease include untreated navels, high bacterial challenge from the environment and inadequate colostrum intake. The bacteria enter via the gut, upper airways, tonsils, and untreated navels, spreading through the bloodstream to the joints.

Diagnosis is usually based on a combination of lamb age and clinical signs. In lambs less than one month-old all lameness and swollen joints should be considered septic until proven otherwise.

Treatment advice from a vet is warranted in these cases.

Preventative measures include adequate intake of quality colostrum quickly and lowering the environmental bacterial challenge.

- Ensure lambs receive enough colostrum within the first two hours of life – if not suckled themselves then supplement by bottle or stomach tube. They should receive 50ml/kg (e.g. 250ml for a 5kg lamb)
- Immerse all navels in 10% iodine within 15 minutes of birth and repeat every 2-4 hours until the navel has completely dried-up.