

MARCHES VETERINARY GROUP

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Scouring lambs



Scouring like this in young lambs is bad news because the lambs will have suffered damage to their intestines that is likely to affect their future growth. A notable thing about this photo is that there is very little grass, so the lambs have to graze close to the ground increasing their exposure to damaging parasites. At this time of year, **lambs should be watched closely for signs of scour and treated promptly.**

The most likely causes are **nematodirus** or **coccidiosis**, or both together.

Nematodirus is a roundworm. Its eggs hatch in the spring following a spell of warmer weather. The risk of disease in lambs is high when lambs are grazing pastures that were grazed by lambs last year. We saw the first case of nematodirus this year on 28th March.

Coccidiosis is a tiny parasite that is also able to survive on pastures from one season to the next. Coccidiosis is not associated with weather conditions in the same way as nematodirus but is generally associated with high stocking densities, prolonged housing and where nursery paddocks are used and groups of lambs follow each other through the same fields.

As we know that **nematodirus eggs have started to hatch in this area**, both diseases should be considered if you see young lambs of 4 to 8 weeks starting to scour. The farm history and the grazing history of the pasture will help you to decide whether lambs should be treated for one or both diseases. Examination of faeces samples or post mortem examination of a freshly dead lamb will enable us to be more sure which parasites are causing the problem.

At this time of year, a white drench (group 1-BZ wormer) is the recommended treatment for nematodirus, followed by a worm egg count on faeces 10 days later to check treatment efficacy.

Coccidiosis can be prevented by including a coccidiostat (Deccox) in creep feed. For treatment we recommend **Baycox drench**. The two drenches can safely be given one after the other, but **never mix drenches**.

The lambs' first dose of **Ovivac P** or **Heptavac P** can be given at the same time as drenching, provided lambs aren't sick.

Planning ahead for weaning lambs

Weaning might still seem a way off – but in order to provide cleaner grazing for lambs after weaning, you need to plan now. **Weaned lambs perform much better if they aren't heavily challenged by worms.** Anywhere that ewes and lambs have grazed

this year will have a significant worm burden by mid summer, so weaned lambs shouldn't go back onto these areas. Think about whether you can keep some areas free from ewes and lambs – eg by grazing with cattle or shutting up to mow. Another option would be to grow a forage crop to wean lambs on to.

Cattle vaccinations

Calves and young cattle should be vaccinated against **clostridial diseases**, such as **Blackleg**, prior to turnout. The primary course is two doses 4 to 6 weeks apart, followed by annual boosters prior to turnout.

For breeding cattle, vaccination against **leptospirosis** is best given prior to turnout in the spring. And for **BVD**, young heifers joining the herd should be vaccinated prior to going to the bull for the first time. The live BVD vaccine, Bovela, is the most convenient to use as it's only a **single dose**. Remember that **live vaccines are particularly fragile**, so it's vital the vaccine is transported and stored correctly prior to use. **Vaccines should be kept refrigerated right up until when you use them**, so if you're injecting a big group of animals, keep the vaccine in a cool box.

The interval between calving and going back to the bull is also a good time to give cows a booster dose of BVD vaccine.

Hypomagnesaemia or staggers in cows and ewes

Grass is growing fast now, so there's a high risk of hypomagnesaemia in cows and ewes in early lactation. The problem is particularly associated with grazing lush grass, but can also occur when animals don't have enough to eat. The initial signs are of twitchiness and an altered gait. This progresses to the animal going down, and often thrashing about. Death can follow rapidly.

A cow that is down and flat out more than 24 hours after calving is an emergency. Call a vet immediately. These animals should not be moved as the stress may kill them. If you can do so safely and without upsetting the cow, start to give a bottle of magnesium under the skin whilst waiting for the vet to arrive.

Ruminants do not store magnesium, so need a supply every day. Options are:
Feeding concentrates every day

- Mg boluses – these are given by mouth and lodge in the rumen, where they release Mg gradually over 3 to 4 weeks. Cows need 2 boluses at an approximate cost of £4 a cow, sheep need a single bolus at approx. £1.20 a ewe.
- Adding Mg to drinking water
- (High Mg buckets –but you can't be sure all animals will take them)

Offering hay or straw in a ring feeder can help by slowing transit time of grass through the gut and allowing the animal more time to absorb any magnesium.

High levels of potash reduce the availability of magnesium, so avoid applying fertilisers with potash to grazing ground in the spring. Applying salt to the pasture improves absorption of magnesium – see http://www.pda.org.uk/pda_leaflets/6-potash-magnesium-sodium/