

Flock Health Planning Abortion



Abortion is an expensive and serious threat, even a 5% abortion rate can reduce potential gross margin by 10%. Each ewe that aborts can represent a reduction in gross margin of around £95. A 25% abortion storm can adversely affect profits, reducing the overall flock gross margins by half.

The three most common infectious causes of abortion in sheep are

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|---|-------------------|
| ▪ Enzootic Abortion | Vaccine available |
| ▪ Toxoplasmosis | Vaccine available |
| ▪ Campylobacter (vibrio) fetus infection | No vaccine |

Infection with Enzootic Abortion results in abortion in late pregnancy, premature lambing or the birth of weak lambs. Enzootic abortion typically occurs in the final 3 weeks of pregnancy. With Toxoplasmosis, the time of infection determines the visible signs detected or seen by farmers:

- **Early Pregnancy:** Early embryonic death. No abortion or visible signs.
- **Mid Pregnancy:** Foetal death and abortion. Dead lambs may be found on the ground.
- **Late pregnancy:** Still-born lambs or weak lambs that fail to thrive.

Campylobacter abortion usually occurs during the last third of pregnancy but infection can also cause early lamb deaths. A small proportion of aborting ewes may develop metritis resulting in severe illness and/or death.

Prevention

Control measures depend on the diagnosis and, to some extent, the individual flock circumstances. Keep cats away from food stores as they are commonly infected with Toxoplasma in their faeces.

If abortions occur in your flock you should:-

- 1) Isolate the aborted ewe from the rest of the flock.
- 2) Remove the aborted foetus and afterbirth and either discuss with your vet. or send to a laboratory for diagnostic purposes
- 3) Handle infected material with care. Wear gloves and wash your hands. Pregnant women should NOT be in contact with lambing ewes or with the outdoor clothing of those who are with the flock at lambing.
- 4) Consult your veterinary surgeon on the diagnosis and control measures including any possible treatments.

If your veterinary surgeon asks you to take abortions to a laboratory for diagnosis, take the afterbirth as well as the foetus (lamb). When both foetus and afterbirth are submitted to the laboratory the diagnosis rate is four times better than the diagnosis rate when only the foetus is submitted. It is important that both are as fresh as possible on submission.

Managing the risk of sheep abortions

Lowest risk

1. Maintaining a closed ewe flock or only purchasing replacement ewe lambs and yearling ewes from accredited-free sources (Premium Health Scheme)
2. Keep purchased flock replacements separate from the main flock until both flocks have finished lambing.
3. Investigating abortions if they occur (submit lambs and afterbirths via your vet to VLA) and developing an appropriate vaccination strategy
4. Buying in replacement breeding stock without checking the health status of the flock of origin
5. Not isolating any aborted ewes or investigating abortions if they occur in more than 1% of the flock.

Highest risk

Flock health planning – abortion decisions

Is there a problem?

Date: _____

Results – this year	Number	Percentage	Target for next year
No. of ewes to ram			
Barren at scanning			
No. of lambs @ scan			
Abortions			
Barren at lambing			
Lambs born			
Lambs born alive Lambs born dead			
Lambs at weaning			
Lambs sold			

Is any action planned? Yes/No

Vaccination			
Cause of abortion	Target groups	Dates	Product
Campylobacter			
Enzootic abortion of ewes			
Toxoplasmosis	All ewes and ewe lambs		Toxovax

Other decisions

Cull ewes that abort Yes/No

Cull ewes exposed to EAE abortions Yes/No

Replacement policy

Buy ewes and ewe lambs from EAE Accredited flocks in the Premium Health Scheme
Find out health status of the flock of origin of any replacements bought.

Flock health planning abortion review date: _____