

Preventing Infections In Newborn Lambs

Large numbers of lambs die in the first days of life from preventable bacterial infections such as watery mouth and navel ill. Problems occurring later on, e.g. joint ill, liver abscesses, meningitis and spinal abscesses also originate during this time. Bacteria infect lambs mainly through the navel or via the mouth. Attention to detail will improve lamb survival rates and reduce time and money spent treating sick lambs.

Environment

Lambs encounter bacteria during and immediately after birth. These cannot be eliminated but you can reduce the numbers that they are exposed to. A lamb seeking a teat will take bacteria into its mouth from the udder and fleece. Dry bedding and clipping will keep ewes cleaner and reduce this risk. Your knees should remain dry while kneeling down and extra bedding may be needed if wet silage is being fed. Lame ewes should be separated and treated as they are another source of bacteria that can infect lambs. Uneaten feeds such as silage should be cleared away daily as it also poses an infection risk. Single pens should be cleaned and disinfected between ewes. Stocking densities should not be too high.

Navels

A wet navel provides a direct route for bacteria to travel into the lamb. The navel should be treated as soon as possible after birth and ideally again 6 hours later. Tincture of Iodine is the best product to use as it will dry the navel and has an antiseptic effect. It is important to dip the entire navel. Keep your container of Iodine clean. Dipping navels will introduce bacteria, straw and faeces into the solution. When the volume gets low tip out any remaining contents and start afresh by cleaning the bottle and refilling it rather than continually topping it up. Iodine is not expensive – doing this at least every 24 hours is better than risking passing infection from lamb to lamb.

Colostrum

Lambs are born without any antibodies and rely on the high levels present in colostrum for immunity against infection. The antibodies are absorbed from the intestine during the first few hours of life and all lambs must receive a good feed in this time. Lambs that do not receive colostrum have a high risk of death. Ewe nutrition and condition score need to be right for them to produce adequate colostrum. Weak, triplet and rejected lambs are among those that will need supplemented. They require 50ml/kg or around 250ml for a twin lamb ideally within 2 hours of birth.

Sick Lambs, Hygiene and Equipment

Sick lambs especially if scoured should be isolated to avoid spread of bacteria. If care is not taken infections can also be transferred on hands, clothing and equipment including warming boxes, bottles and stomach tubes. Items for use with newborn lambs can be sterilised e.g. with Miltons sterilising fluid.



Vaccinations

Clostridial vaccines given to the ewes 4-6 weeks pre-lambing will protect against lamb dysentery, (not Ovivac). They will only work if the lambs receive enough colostrum.

Antibiotics

Dosing every lamb with antibiotics at birth is not ideal but does have its place especially where there is an on going problem and lamb welfare is an issue. They should only be used in conjunction with all other possible measures to limit bacterial build up.

Heather Stevenson, SAC Veterinary Services
heather.stevenson@sac.co.uk



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