

# How to prevent and treat skin diseases in sheep

## SKIN DISEASES

**Caroline Abbott** BVMedSci (Hons) BVM BVS MSc MRCVS, of Paragon Veterinary Group, looks at how to deal with skin parasites



**ADVICE:** Caroline Abbott of Paragon Veterinary Group

**T**HERE are a number of causes of itching and scratching in sheep, which can cause a series of problems. Fortunately, there are good practices that can help to prevent them and ways of dealing with the consequences if your flock does become infected.

### What causes itching/scratching in sheep?

There are three main causes of itching and scratching in sheep: sheep scab, lice and fly strike.

### What is sheep scab?

Sheep scab is a skin disease caused by a burrowing mite called *Psoroptes ovis*. These mites cause small pustules on the skin surface, which produce the moist scabs that are typical of this disease. Sheep scab is intensely itchy, and affected sheep will bite and pull at their fleece and, as a result and through reduced feed intake, they can rapidly lose body condition.

Mites can survive off the sheep for up to 17 days, so can be present on creep feeders and gateposts where

affected sheep have been scratching.

### Lice versus sheep scab – what's the difference?

Similar to sheep scab, lice infestations are mainly seen in winter and can be easily confused with scab. Lice tend to cause less skin damage and are bigger than mites. They are visible to the naked eye (if you've got good eyesight).

### Fly strike/maggots – is this different?

Yes. Well known to all sheep owners, this disease increases in prevalence during the summer months as the temperature rises. Unshorn or dirty sheep are much more prone to the disease, which normally starts around the tail, but can affect any part of the skin. Timely shearing, dagging and preventative treatments

are vital.

### Biosecurity – why is it so important?

If you are bringing sheep onto your holding, it is important to remember they may well be carrying unseen parasites. All bought-in animals should therefore be quarantined, treated and kept separate for three weeks after arrival on farm. Good fencing is vital in preventing unwanted visits from stray sheep.

### Prevention and treatment – dips, pour-ons or injection?

In all cases, it is important to remember to treat all sheep within a flock at once.

Organophosphate dips are probably the most effective way to treat and prevent fly-strike, ticks, lice and scab. However, it is vital that the dip

tors wearing suitable protective clothing should use these dips.

Pour-ons, if used as per manufacturers recommendations, can give good protection against fly-strike, lice and ticks, but are not effective against scab.

Avermectin and Milbemycin injections will kill sheep scab but not all lice. The dose and duration of effect varies between products, so follow specific treatment advice from your vet or SQP (Suitably Qualified Person) for effective control.

### In summary:

- Avoid buying sheep from unknown sources;
- Quarantine/treat new arrivals;
- Treat the whole flock;
- Keep sheep fleeces clean by having a worm/cocci control plan and by timely shearing/dagging;
- Put in place regular treatments during summer to prevent fly strike;
- When you have a problem, get the sheep examined to identify the parasite involved;
- Work with your vet to use the right product, at the right dose.

**Capontree**  
T: 016977 2318  
www.capontreevets.co.uk

**KINGSWAY**  
T: 01756 700940  
www.kingswayvets.co.uk

**MILLCROFT**  
T: 01900 826666  
www.milcroftvets.co.uk

**BISHOPTON**  
T: 01765 602396  
www.bishoptonvets.co.uk

**Scot & Mitchell**  
T: 01434 608999  
www.vets1.com

**Westmorland Veterinary Group**  
T: 01539 722692  
www.westmorland-vets.co.uk

**paragon farm VETERINARY GROUP**  
Carlisle House, Townhead Road, Dalston, Carlisle, CA5 7JF  
**T: 01228 710208**  
**www.paragonvet.com**

XLVets is a group of 52 vet practices all committed to the future of UK agriculture. By working together and sharing best practice, we aim to deliver the best health advice for your farm.

**XLvets**  
Excellence in Practice  
**www.xlvets.co.uk**