

Warm weather watch for sheep disease

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Vet **Richard Knight** provides some timely advice for your customers



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With the welcome warm weather, we're not the only ones thriving on it. All the coccidia around at the moment are thriving too, and with any scouring lambs at this time of year coccidiosis has to be very high on the list of things to be considered. The Genus which causes the problem is called *Eimeria*, with *E. ovinoidalis* and *E. crandallis* being the two species which are known to cause disease in sheep. A few other species can infect the sheep, but these are of little pathogenic importance.

When considering scouring lambs, a faecal sample is very useful. This sheds light on nematodes and coccidia that are there and can also

rule out those that are not there! Having said that, sudden deaths caused by coccidia and *Nematodirus battus*, where there is no evidence in the faeces, can occur. Post-nematode infection gut damage and turning out onto very lush pasture are other causes which need to be thrown into the mix for consideration. Coccidial oocyst counts can vary massively between batches and flocks; indeed we have found oocyst counts to be very high at 50,000 oocysts/gram of faeces in normal lamb faecal pellets where the lambs are normal and growing very well, so what's that all about? The explanation can be found in the fact that the composition of that oocyst count varies, with some farms not seeming to suffer the two pathogenic strains.

Where the pathogenic strains are present, we see scour at 2,000-3,000 oocysts/gram, which resolves with medical treatment. So where do we go? The Animal Health Veterinary Laboratories Agency (AHVLA) offers a service through the farmers' veterinary surgeons where they can hatch and speciate the oocysts present to determine the proportions of each species, therefore showing the presence of pathogenic species on the farm in question. It makes great medical sense to perform this test on any farm that seems to have a problem with coccidiosis, especially when the problem is recurrent. The point of all this is to ensure that the lambs are treated properly with a medicine that has the best chance of working, and

is over-used as little as possible to reduce the chance of resistance developing over a period of time. So, to put a bit more science back into the job, "My lambs are scoured with cocci" isn't necessarily the case without looking (at the faeces and the farm history), and also just because coccidia are there in the faeces doesn't always mean they are causing a problem. The risk of coccidiosis can be lessened by reducing overcrowding, which can be difficult if weather conditions mean that the grass growth is drastically reduced. Not making younger lambs follow on from older lambs can also reduce the risk of disease as the older ones can multiply up the coccidia and show little signs themselves as their immune system develops. Concurrent infection with

Nematodirus battus can also worsen symptoms of coccidiosis scour, so if symptoms persist after treatment for *Nematodirus*, and the advisable 10-day post-treatment tests show that the wormer has worked, then treatment for coccidiosis may be needed.

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