



The
GEORGE
Farm Vets

Infectious abortion in Sheep

February 2021

Abortion in sheep is a major cause of loss in flocks around the UK, with serious welfare and financial implications. Whatever the scale, losses in lambing season are never welcome, but infectious causes are among the worst, with potentially catastrophic long-term implications.

The most common infectious causes can all be harmful to humans, and pregnant women are particularly at risk, so it is very important to keep potentially infected ewes away from at risk people.

Spotting infectious abortion

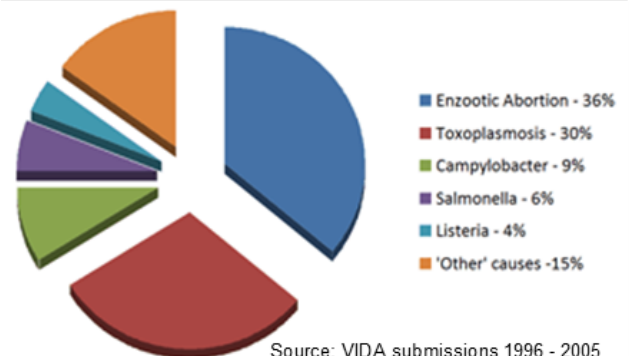
Some abortion in a flock is unavoidable, but if more than 2% of lambs are aborted then a full investigation of the flock needs to be undertaken, as this suggests an infective cause. For this reason, it is important to keep good, up-to-date records of losses during lambing season, so action can be taken as soon as possible.

Regular walks around the flock allow you to check on the welfare of your sheep and spot signs of abortion quickly. Be on the lookout for dead lambs that are not fully formed, rotten or smelly afterbirth, or ewes with bloody legs and tails.



There are many causes of abortion in the UK, however, EAE, toxoplasma and campylobacter are by far the most common.

Most Common Causes of Abortion in Sheep



EAE

In the UK, the most common cause of abortion in ewes is EAE or Enzootic abortion of Ewes. The abortion usually happens within the last 3 weeks of pregnancy. Lambs from infected ewes are usually fresh dead or born very weak and usually die soon after. The infection spreads through aborted material and uterine discharge, so the ewe and her bedding material should be removed from the rest of the sheep immediately. Any ewes who do not abort this year may still be infected and abort next year.

Vaccines are available for use before mating to prevent infection, or for use during an outbreak to reduce losses.

Toxoplasma gondii

Toxoplasma can be carried and spread by infected cats. Infection can cause a variety of signs, from barren ewes to stillborn lambs, depending on when the ewe was infected. Keeping feed free from cats and other animals

will help prevent the spread of this disease. There is also a preventative vaccine available, which gives at least 2 seasons of protection.

Campylobacter

Campylobacter often cause late abortions or weak sickly lambs. The bacteria can be carried in sheep and live in the environment for long periods of time. Good hygiene and clean bedding in housing areas are key to preventing the spread of this disease. Gathering points, such as near water troughs or feeding spaces are especially at risk, so particular attention should be paid to these areas.

There is currently no vaccine in the UK. Treatment is difficult, but sheep develop immunity after their first infection.

Diagnosis

The best way to find a definite cause for abortion is to send off the aborted foetus and placenta for investigation. By having both, a definitive diagnosis is much more likely. This is best done early on, so the issue can be managed quickly.

Guide to managing abortion.

1. Record any abortions and isolate all aborted ewes.
2. Keep all at-risk people, especially pregnant women, away from the ewes and aborted material.
3. Place the foetus and placenta in a labelled bag or container
4. Remove and destroy all bedding in the lambing pen.
5. Call your vet to discuss further investigation or possible treatment.

How to prevent infectious abortion

Prevention is the best way to reduce losses from abortion. By stopping disease from entering your flock in the first place, we have the biggest impact on sheep health. We can do this by:

- Storing feed in animal proof containers
- Fencing off ponds or other sources of water
- Reducing the number of sheep bought in
- Avoid bringing in old or pregnant ewes
- Vaccinate all replacements against EAE and toxoplasmosis
- Keep bought-in ewes separate from home ewes until after the first lambing

As always, if you have any other concerns or queries, please feel free to give us a ring at the practice.

All the Best,

Ben J



The George Vet Group is about to embark on "Every Mile Matters!" This will be to continue our support for Action for Pulmonary Fibrosis in Tim's memory, and we are aiming to cover 1000 miles between us from the 13th to 21st of February using whatever means of exercise we can (run/bike/swim/roller-skates/row/pogo stick etc.). If you would like to join in or support with a donation the link is <https://www.justgiving.com/fundraising/everymitematters>