



Haemonchus contortus - Barbers pole worm

September 2025

Haemonchus contortus is a gut worm where the adults settle in the abomasum. Adult haemonchus worms have the ability to remove large quantities of blood (0.05ml/day) from their host. That means a sheep carrying 5,000 adult worms may lose 250ml of blood per day. This, combined with blood loss from the stomach lining due to ulceration, causes anaemia and risk of death. As few as 500 adult worms can cause disease.

Haemonchus burdens on pasture can build up quickly as the life cycle of the worm (time from adult laying eggs in host to those eggs becoming laying adults) is 20 days and an adult can lay 5000-15000 eggs per day.



Adult Haemonchus contortus with its 'barbers pole' appearance (image from SCOPS)

The risk of haemonchus is ever growing due to climate change. Warm and wet conditions, especially after dry spells, create ideal conditions for haemonchus larvae to thrive on pasture. The season where animals are affected also appears to be extending, with more outbreaks occurring later in the autumn. There have also been reports of haemonchus overwintering on pasture, meaning burdens can remain from one year to the next. This means that if haemonchus is diagnosed on your farm you will need to be vigilant in future years.

Unlike most other gut worms, sheep do not build up immunity to haemonchus so adult ewes and rams are at risk and sampling of these should be considered to look for haemonchus when doing routine worm egg counts.

Animals with high haemonchus burdens can show the following signs:

- Weak animals that are likely to collapse if gathered
- Pale mucous membranes (around the eyes is a good place to look)
- Quick, shallow breathing and increased heart rate
- Scour/mucky back ends is not a typical sign
- Sudden death

The onset of clinical signs may be so sudden that affected animals are still in good body condition.



Very pale conjunctiva suggesting significant blood loss (image from NADIS)



Submandibular oedema, 'bottle jaw' (image from NADIS)

Long standing haemonchus burdens are characterised by bottle jaw (sub-mandibular oedema), which means it can resemble liver fluke. Weight loss, poor condition and lethargy will also be seen.

Testing

Differentiating haemonchus eggs from other strongyles is difficult as they look very similar; but if we see high egg counts from a group or individual, along with the clinical signs listed above, haemonchus will be the likely suspect. However, the worm egg counting system we use in our lab, **Ovacyte**, now has the capability to accurately differentiate haemonchus eggs from other strongyle eggs. This allows us to better understand the parasite patterns on our farms and use more targeted treatments where appropriate.

Targeted Selective Treatments

Using targeted selective treatments will minimise the risk of developing anthelmintic resistance. When treating older ewes and rams especially, there should be no reason to use a wormer that is commonly used for managing other gut worms as they will have built up immunity to these. **Albendazole** and **closantal** are active ingredients in wormers that are used to treat fluke, however they both are effective against haemonchus as well.

A vaccine called **Barbervax** is available to help manage haemonchus. Although the vaccine needs to be given at regular intervals, it will allow reduced wormer use which is better for the environment and help reduce the risk of resistance. Speak to one of the vets if you think this will be of interest to you.

Bluetongue Update

At the time of writing (14/8/25) there have been 12 confirmed cases of bluetongue in England. The 5 most recent cases have all been in sheep. Oxfordshire, Dorset, Hampshire and Herefordshire have all had cases so it will be in the area. Sheep have more severe clinical signs than cattle so it makes sense that more cases are being picked up more in sheep.

With the whole of England being classed as a restriction zone, there will be less pre and post movement tests being carried out, this will mean cases with vague or reduced clinical signs will be missed (in cattle). Therefore, I feel the actual number of cases this year so far will be much higher than the number confirmed.

The clinical signs in sheep are severe with reports from Belgium finding that 70% of sheep displaying clinical signs died. Therefore, vaccinating sheep against this disease is highly recommended. Please ring us if you want further information about vaccinating.

MEDICINE HANDLING COURSE

@ The Practice on
Thursday 11th September
11am to 12.30pm
(Non specific species)



Call us on 01666 823035 or
remember...

OTHER NEWS....

Joining the farm team in September
are new grad vets:



Sophie Hicks
and

Megan McCrory
(from 16th September)

I'm sure you will join us in welcoming
them to the practice

You can now
contact us via

- Chat
- Send photos
- Send video
- Send voicenotes



WhatsApp
07441 368210

All the best, Will



COMPASSION RESPECT INTEGRITY SUSTAINABILITY PROGRESSION CARE

T: 01666 823035 Option "1" for visits or enquiries, "2" for medicines, "3" for TB testing