



Getting on top of Coccidiosis: a Gut-wrenching disease

Coccidia are actually protozoan parasites (oocysts) rather than worms, and not all of them are pathogenic. However, both *Eimeria crandallis* and *Eimeria ovinoidalis* are potential killers.

Coccidiosis is an insidious disease of the intestinal tract most commonly seen in undernourished, unweaned lambs aged 4-7 weeks, either indoors or on heavily stocked pasture in cold, wet weather. Stress, such as transport, bad weather, sudden dietary changes or the presence of other disease can make the condition worse.

Animals become affected after they have ingested the infective stage (sporulated oocysts) from contaminated feed or water. The impact of this disease on lambs less than three months old is extremely debilitating and can cause severe and permanent gut damage.

Initial infection comes from the ewe. Healthy ewes, protected from coccidial disease by immunity, still carry the parasites and oocysts are shed in their droppings, which are picked up by lambs.

Oocysts also exist in pastures and buildings where the previous season's lambs were kept. Whilst infection soon after birth usually causes no disease, the oocysts still establish themselves and multiply rapidly releasing many thousands of millions into the environment 2-3 weeks later.

Regular faecal egg counts (FECs) in growing lambs will identify the level of infection but not the species' ability to cause disease. I had worm counts done last year indicating a significant level of coccidia, wormed with Vecoxan as instructed by the vet twice with a three week interval between. The repeat FEC six weeks later showed the presence of coccidia but the lambs were thriving. This confirmed that the coccidia population in those particular animals were not a virulently pathogenic type, but it's better to be safe than sorry.

Symptoms to look out for are faecal staining around backside (due to profuse, watery and often blood or mucous-streaked diarrhoea), depression, general ill-thrift and weight loss, a tucked-up appearance with an 'open' fleece, abdominal pain, weakness and dehydration, poor appetite, weight loss, anaemia and if left untreated, in some cases death (from dehydration). Continued ill-thrift after worming is definitely worth investigating urgently.

Coccidiosis is not one to ignore – regular Faecal Egg Counts will show their presence, hopefully before the levels become pathogenic, and if levels are high the use of products such as **Vecoxan** or **Baycox** will treat the disease if administered correctly calibrated for the weight.

Management of environmental conditions is also essential. Lambs should ideally be put out to graze on land that has been free from sheep for two seasons, as coccidial oocysts are capable of surviving on pasture for at least 18 months.

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