

LAMBING FACT SHEET 2: JOINT ILL IN LAMBS



'Joint ill' is a bacterial infection of one or more joints in young lambs. The bacteria infect the lambs by a number of routes- orally, via the navel, via wounds including tagging sites, castration sites and docking sites especially as the tail detaches. The bacteria then enter the bloodstream and settle out in the joints. When samples are taken from young lambs and the bacteria cultured, more than 85% of them are infected with *Streptococcus Dysgalactiae*, a bacteria that also causes mastitis in cows.

These bacteria can come both from carrier ewes as well as the environment. The bacteria can survive for 6 weeks on bedding material like straw so if you are faced with an outbreak it will help to clean out the lambing pens completely and disinfect them thoroughly. As well as loving moist dirty conditions, it is able to survive in the dust in buildings contaminating taggers, ear tags etc. that are lying around. If you have dairy cows and sheep disinfect your boots as you move from cow buildings to work with sheep.

Although lambs are infected with the bacteria in the first few days of life, they usually don't become obviously lame until 5-10 days of age, often after turnout. Affected joints are swollen, hot and painful and lambs can be unwilling to stand on that leg at all. They lie down more frequently and struggle to keep up with their dams which reduces suckling. Sometimes the spine can be affected leading to paralysis of either the back legs alone or all 4 limbs. Even with treatment the resultant joint damage can severely affect growth.

HOW TO TREAT JOINT ILL

It is important to both identify affected lambs and start treatment quickly. Talk to one of the farm vets about which antibiotics are best. Antibiotic treatment will be needed for at least 5 days and lambs that are not responding after the first 5 days are unlikely to improve and euthanasia should be considered. Anti-inflammatories and occasionally steroids can help but only tiny doses are needed so this should be discussed with one of the vets.

HOW TO PREVENT JOINT ILL

1. **Keep lambing pens clean; if possible muck out and disinfect between ewes. This is especially important if you have an outbreak of joint ill**
2. **Ensure lambs get plenty of colostrum as this prevents the bacteria getting into the blood stream (see Lambing fact sheet 1: watery mouth for more information about colostrum quality)**
3. **Treat navels promptly with iodine and repeat after 3-4 hours either with iodine or antibiotic spray**
4. **Use surgical spirit in a spray bottle to disinfect taggers, ear tags, rings etc between lambs. Spray surgical spirit onto lambs ears before tagging**
5. **Only** if you have had a problem with joint ill, should you consider using injectable antibiotics as a preventative measure. However, you should try and target this to lambs that are more likely to be at risk e.g because they didn't get enough colostrum :- twins, triplets, lambs from ewes in poor condition. An outbreak often occurs after wet weather when fields are muddy or bedding gets damp inside so treat lambs going outside when the forecast isn't good or fields are muddy. The challenges we all face with antibiotic resistance mean that if possible we should avoid injecting every lamb on any farm with antibiotics. The best antibiotics for joint ill aren't effective given orally so the tablets and oral dosers are not indicated in the prevention or treatment of joint ill.