

LAMBING FACT SHEET 1: WATERY MOUTH



You will all be aware that 'watery mouth' and 'rattle belly' are caused by E Coli bacteria. These are faecal bacteria and the main source is the lambs' environment, contaminated wool on the mother's tail/backend or a dirty udder. Lambs become infected soon after birth and the bacteria multiply in the gut, getting into the bloodstream and releasing toxins that make the lambs very unwell. Lambs are normally affected within 12-36 hours of birth. The initial signs are that lambs are dull and reluctant to suck, salivate a lot and they may develop distended bellies. As the disease progresses they become unable to stand, often become hypothermic and scour may develop if the lambs survive long enough.

HOW TO TREAT WATERY MOUTH

Although the mortality rate is high, treatment should be attempted with rehydration solutions orally (50mls/kg 4 times daily). In very early cases oral antibiotics can be used but later on bacteria are in the bloodstream so injectable antibiotics are preferred. Metacam may also be helpful in combating the toxemia but a 4kg lamb will only need 0.2ml so be careful with dosages. It is also important to keep lambs warm.

HOW TO PREVENT WATERY MOUTH?

1. **Reduce the challenge that the lambs face**
2. **Maximise their immunity – COLOSTRUM IS GOLD!**
3. **If despite this you still have issues, you could try oral antibiotics at birth in the at risk lambs- twins, triplets or lambs from ewes with limited colostrum.**

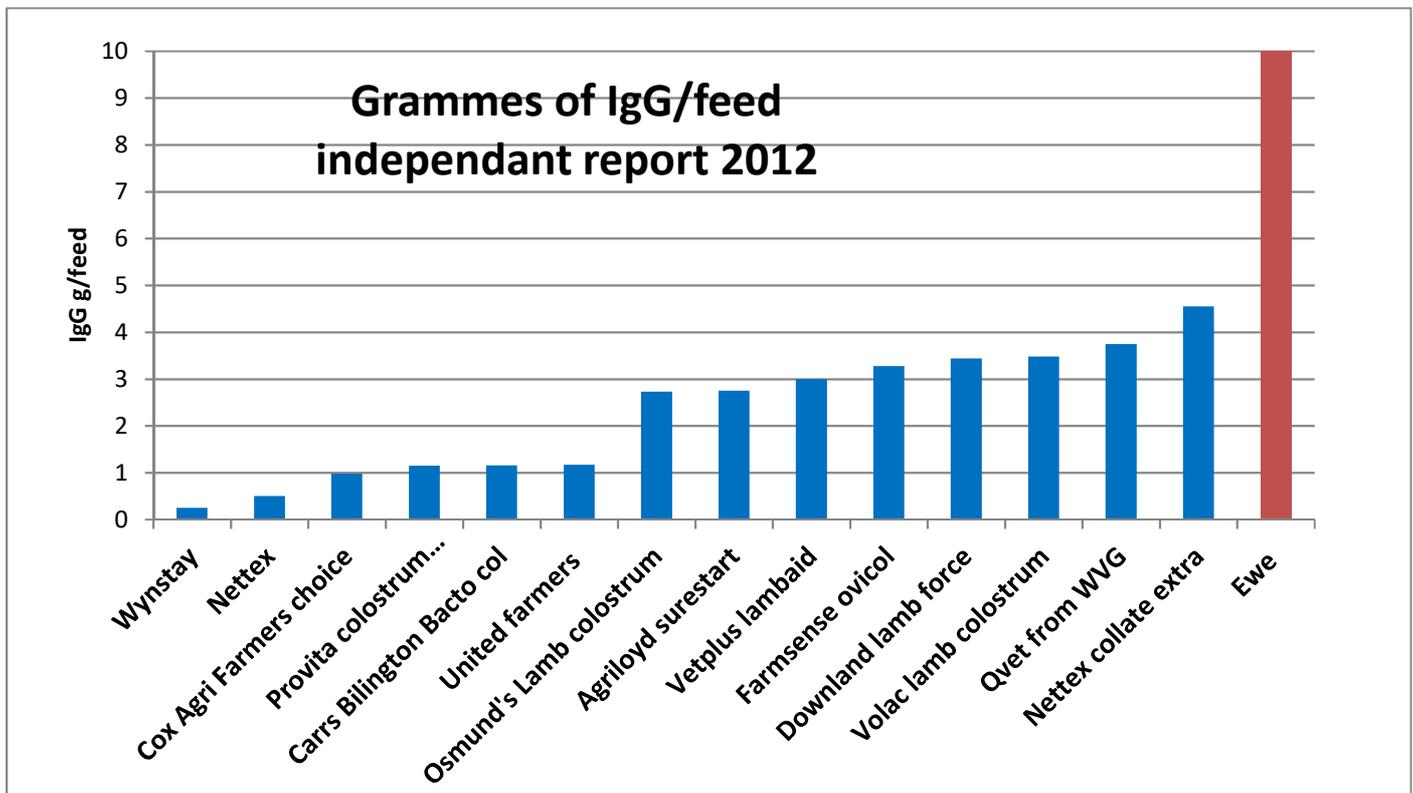
Before lambing

1. Ensure ewes are in the correct body condition to lamb with plenty of colostrum
2. Group ewes according to litter size and condition score
3. Get forage analysed and buy quality cake to match it so that the ewes have enough energy and protein especially 'bypass' protein in their late pregnancy diet
4. Make it easy for all ewes to eat forage and concentrates by ensuring that they have at least 15cm rack space for forage and 45-50cms trough space for concentrates. You can 'floor feed' or use TMR rations which helps ensure everyone gets what they need.
5. Dag out ewes and clip tails to reduce contamination for the lambs
6. Clean and DISINFECT the lambing shed/pens/buckets etc before lambing starts so there is no infection left over from last year
7. Make it easy to bed pens frequently and if at all possible clean individual pens out between ewes.
8. Buy a good quality colostrum replacement- these will never be as good as ewe colostrum but some contain virtually no antibody– see table below. You can use cow colostrum but mix colostrum from 3 cows in case one carries anti-sheep antibody.

At lambing time

1. Keep lambing pens as clean as possible
2. Check lambs are full 1-2 hours after birth
3. Spray navels with iodine and blue spray several hours apart. (Important but not necessarily to prevent watery mouth)
4. Do not tail or castrate lambs until they have had a good feed.

5. If you have any doubt that lambs have had enough colostrum try and strip the ewe and tube them. If you cannot strip the ewe, use a quality colostrum replacer. A lamb needs a **minimum** of 50mls/kg bodyweight of colostrum within 2-3 hours of birth and then about 200mls/kg bodyweight within 24hrs. Giving a 4kg lamb 200 mls of ewe colostrum will give them 10g/l of immunoglobulin G which is the important antibody for lambs. In contrast, one feed of any colostrum substitute will only give you 4g or less!! (see graph below based on data from the ICNE 2012). Don't forget to clean and disinfect the tube between lambs



Using oral antibiotics to prevent watery mouth

You will all be aware that there is widespread concern about antibiotic resistance in the bacteria that can cause serious/fatal disease in people. For obvious reasons, there is pressure on both doctors and vets to reduce the antibiotics they use and to avoid using the ones considered to be critically important in treating people. Fortunately, we don't use these very often in sheep.

No one is suggesting that we shouldn't use antibiotics to treat ill animal's but reducing the antibiotics we give to healthy animals to prevent disease is one area where we could improve things significantly. Legally, we are also obliged to use products that are licenced for that species of animal and for that condition unless we can provide evidence that those products aren't working on individual farms or in particular situations. Two years ago, the Scottish colleges reported a worrying pattern of resistance in the E coli bacteria isolated from lambs with watery mouth with significant levels of resistance to the most commonly used antibiotics including 50% of isolates being resistant to oxytetracycline.

We can fully understand how nerve wracking it is not to give every lamb a dose of antibiotics if that is what you are used to doing. If in the past you have dosed every lamb, this year consider not treating strong singles from ewes that are full of milk. If you do have a problem, now is the time to get some samples so we can check which is the most appropriate antibiotic for you to use.