

Avoiding Disease: How can you keep lambs healthy and reduce antibiotic use?



National Advice Hub
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Conditions such as watery mouth, navel ill, joint ill, scour, meningitis and septicaemia in lambs can be caused by E.coli (Escheria coli). These infections occur when young lambs which aren't protected by colostrum meet bacteria, due to poor environmental hygiene.

The best method of protection is to ensure lambs have sufficient colostrum, navels are treated and a good level of hygiene is maintained, says Kirsten Williams, Sheep & Beef Consultant, SAC Consulting. Attempting to prevent these infections by treating neonatal lambs with antibiotics at birth, in the form of either a long acting antibiotic or a pre made oral solution is a costly method, and not necessarily effective with current evidence of resistance to antibiotics. Antibiotics cannot make up for poor or delayed colostrum intake. Without colostrum lambs have no defence against disease.

E.coli infections are transmitted to young lambs through numerous routes including:

Lack of colostrum	Dirty and wet bedding
Overcrowding	Dirty and wet udder
Inadequate ventilation	Dirty and wet wool

Young lambs do not have any defence mechanisms and without colostrum are susceptible to such infections. Colostrum provides the lambs with energy, antibodies and essential nutrients while also acting as a laxative, cleaning out the digestive tract.

Practical steps to reduce the risk to your lambs.

- Colostrum is absolutely key: ensure all lambs get 50ml/kg within the first 6 hours, and a total of 210-290ml/kg in the first 24 hours after birth.**
- Store a bank of ewe's colostrum from singles with a plentiful supply. This can be frozen in ice cube trays, plastic bags, small bottles and thawed as needed (never microwave as this denatures the protein). Consult your vet if Johne's is in the flock.**
- Crutch ewes pre lambing, which will avoid lambs ingesting dirt when searching for the teat.**
- Clean each pen between each occupancy with a sanitiser. There are many products available including powder disinfectant that can be applied to the straw limiting the labour input of removing straw and disinfecting.**
- Fix any leaks in the shed to prevent damp bedding.**
- Use a base of sawdust or woodchip in the housed area with clean straw on top; this will keep the straw cleaner and dryer for longer.**

Prevention is key – keep a clean, dry environment and ensure all lambs receive the necessary volume of quality colostrum quickly. Correct pre lambing nutrition is fundamental in achieving a good supply of quality colostrum, as well as enhancing vigour in lambs, minimal lamb losses, good lamb birth weights and better mothering.

If you need more advice on antibiotics or on any other topic, the Farm Advisory Service has a range of support and help available:

Advice line

For free telephone advice on a wide variety of topics including cross compliance, water framework directive requirements, climate change and other technical issues call us on 0300 323 0161 or email advice@fas.scot. The advice line operates between 9am and 5pm Monday to Friday.

Bespoke Advice and Grants

FAS can also help you to increase the profitability and sustainability of your farming business through Scottish Government grants including Integrated Land Management Plans (ILMPs) – worth up to £1,200. The ILMP will identify opportunities and cost savings for your business, based on an independent and confidential assessment of your business by an experienced farm business adviser of your choosing. As part of your plan you can choose to benefit from up to two further specialist advice plans.

Online

Our website contains articles, videos and much more at www.fas.scot

Scotland's Farm Advisory Service (FAS) is part of the Scottish Rural Development Programme (SRDP) which is co-funded by the EU and Scottish Government, providing information and resources aimed at increasing the profitability and sustainability of farms and crofts.

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