

PREGNANCY TOXAEMIA IN EWES (also known as twin lamb disease or acetoanaemia)

Description

Pregnancy Toxaemia is an energy crisis disease of heavily pregnant ewes (or cattle, goats). It results as a consequence of an insufficient dietary intake to satisfy the huge energy demands of late pregnancy. Insufficient energy intake occurs due to:

- a) poor available feed
- b) ewe too fat/pregnant, restricting the physical room for feed i.e. simply cannot eat enough!
- c) Ewe goes off her feed for another reason – through a fence, indigestion, in shed for crutching.

When faced with this insufficiency the body responds by rapidly breaking down body fat. Unfortunately rapid fat breakdown produces ketones (e.g. acetone, which is nail polish remover). Ketones are toxic, producing the characteristic weakness and “dopiness”. Fat is shifted to the liver to perform this process, resulting in a swollen yellow – brown liver.

Prevention

Feed management – avoid getting ewes too fat in early and mid pregnancy, feed them up in late pregnancy. If already fat, do not attempt to starve them down in late pregnancy.

Avoid late pregnancy stress – keep periods of yarding very short – do not yard up the night before for crutching. Shift stock only small distances.

If pregnancy toxaemia is a regular event on your farm, consider pregnancy scanning for twins, allowing intensive management of the twin lambers.

Treatment – risks

Remember that a few sick sheep are the tip of the iceberg – ewes only show illness when quiet severely ill, so the remainder of the mob will be affected to a degree (especially those with twins). When planning treatment, do not stress the animals too much – don’t chase the mob around too much – don’t chase the mob around to catch one dodderly old ewe!

Treatment – drugs and drenches

Simple energy replacement will only assist those that are very mildly affected. Simple sugar drenches e.g. Vytrate etc. does not work in any but the mildest cases.

Energy replacement –

- a) Glycerine based drenches e.g. Acetol® - bypass the normal energy pathways and benefit even severely affected sheep – 50 – 70 mls twice daily.
- b) Injectable dextrose – either pure dextrose or as part of “4 in 1’s” provides energy direct to the bloodstream. 1/5 or 1/6 of a pack per ewe injected under the skin.

Abort / induce the lambs – reduced the energy load (involves prescription drugs)

- a) Prostaglandin – promotes the birth process. Juramate/Estrumate 1 ml into the muscle. This is a dangerous drug and should be handled with care, and not at all by asthmatics or pregnant women.
- b) Dexamethasone – various types – also promote the birth process, but helps with increased lamb survival as well. It has a secondary effect of stopping the fat breakdown.

Induction of birth in ewes is unpredictable, so sometimes this treatment fails and needs repeating. Unfortunately the condition often worsens in these animals meaning a first time failure is fatal.

What not to treat.

Despite an occasional reported miracle, we do not recommend treatment of sheep that are unable to sit up, or those apparently blind.