MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY
EXTENSION

Market Lamb Project Guide: Healthcare Management

Showing market lambs is an exciting livestock project for 4-H and Future Farmers of America (FFA) youth. Putting in hard work by exercising and showing your lamb at home often pays off at the show. The success you have with your lamb depends a lot on an effective healthcare management program. If you raise your own lambs from birth, you should keep complete and accurate records of the vaccination and feeding program. If you buy your lambs, be sure to get the vaccination and feeding program that the producer used. This will allow you to understand what has been done to the lambs so you can maintain an effective healthcare management program.

Watch your lambs every day for changes in their behavior and attitude. One sign to look for is the lamb going off feed. This is a signal of a health problem, and you need to take action to help your animal recover completely. A big part of an effective healthcare program is disease prevention, which includes vaccinations, deworming, hoof care, and medications in feed.

This guide will provide an overview of common diseases and other conditions found in lambs, signs to look for to determine if your lamb is infected, and preventive measures to take.

Enterotoxemia (Overeating Disease)

Enterotoxemia, also called overeating disease, typically occurs in lambs that are fed rations designed to promote rapid growth (high average daily gain), where the type or amount of feed has changed drastically. When these situations occur, bacteria in the intestines can multiply too quickly and produce deadly levels of toxins. Enterotoxemia gives no warning signs and is not treatable. Death is often the first clear sign of the disease in your flock. It usually occurs within 2 hours of the start of any noticeably strange behavior.

The key to preventing overeating disease is to vaccinate against it. The vaccine protects specific bacteria in the intestines, including clostridium perfringens (types C and D). If you buy lambs that have not been vaccinated for overeating disease, get them vaccinated the day you purchase them. An effective vaccination program for overeating disease includes two vaccinations, with the first injection given before the feeding period and a booster shot (a second injection) given 2 to 3 weeks later. Additional boosters can be given at 2- to 3-month intervals.

In addition to vaccinating, you can help prevent overeating disease in other ways. When you change rations or switch to a different feed, make changes gradually. Over the course of days or weeks, increase the amount of new feed as you decrease the amount of old feed until the lamb is on the new ration completely. Another feeding strategy that reduces overeating is to feed lambs at regular intervals each day and to mix the ration properly before serving it.

If you feed lambs as a group, make sure all the lambs are about the same size and there is enough trough space for all of them to eat. Smaller lambs may not be able to eat enough, as larger, more aggressive lambs could eat too much or keep smaller lambs away from the feed trough. When given the chance to eat, small lambs may then eat too much of the ration. Close all doors to feed rooms and securely close feed storage bins to keep lambs out of excess feed. If you give a lamb extra feed because it still seems hungry after eating its ration, it may overeat. When at livestock shows, it is important to close the gate to your lamb's pen securely and to use a muzzle to prevent overeating. Lambs may try to get out of their pens, especially at night when the barn is empty, and eat extra feed. Even if the extra food intake doesn't kill it, the lamb may become sick for several days and not show very well.

Tetanus

Like horses, lambs are very susceptible to tetanus. Lambs should be vaccinated with a tetanus toxoid to achieve long-term protection. This vaccination can be administered with clostridium perfringens types C and D (for overeating disease) in a CDT toxoid. If your lamb gets a cut or puncture wound and you are not sure of the lamb's immunization record, a single tetanus antitoxin should be administered for immediate protection.

Internal Parasites (Worms)

Lambs often get infested with internal parasites, but you can prevent and control infestation with the right treatment. As with all diseases, focus on preventing internal parasites in your lambs. Part of the prevention program involves proper nutrition. A well-fed, healthy lamb can tolerate more parasites than an underfed, sick lamb can.

Internal parasites can damage lambs in a couple of ways. Developing larvae can damage the glandular cells of the stomach and disturb the digestive process. Also, *Haemonchus contortus*, a ravenous bloodsucking worm, can remove lots of blood from a lamb. The lamb may become anemic because it is not able to replace the rapid loss of blood. Anemia keeps the lamb from getting enough oxygen to tissues in the body and can cause death.

There are several symptoms of internal parasites in lambs. These include loss in body condition, listlessness, scouring, bottle jaw (fluid between the jaws), gum paleness, and a loss of reddish color inside the eyelids. The presence of tapeworms is evident when small, white specks appear in the fecal droppings. Tapeworms live in the small intestines and are transmitted to sheep by a small, nonparasitic mite that lives on grass.

To prevent internal parasites, deworm regularly. Lambs should be dewormed every 30 days for best results. This helps the lamb achieve its growth potential. Several sheep dewormers are available in a drench or bolus form that control internal parasites effectively. Talk to your veterinarian to decide on a deworming program that best fits your situation. You can also submit lamb stool samples to your veterinarian to help identify the most effective prevention program.

Coccidiosis is an intestinal tract infection that nearly every young lamb gets. However, lambs become immune with time. Lambs can get coccidia when they eat feed contaminated with manure or drink dirty water. Generally, problems with coccidiosis occur in small, crowded pens that have wet bedding and are contaminated with feces. Physical stresses like bad weather, handling, and transportation can increase the likelihood of a lamb's contracting coccidiosis.

Coccidiosis infects the small intestines of sheep. Blood is not visible in the feces of sheep as it is in cattle, where most damage occurs in the colon and rectum. A symptom of coccidiosis is a "pea soup" diarrhea that has a strong, distinctive odor. A veterinarian can diagnose coccidiosis from a fecal sample and prescribe medicine to treat the lamb. To help prevent coccidiosis, practice good sanitation by cleaning pens and feed and water troughs thoroughly.

Foot Rot and Foot Scald

The most common visible sign of foot rot and foot scald is a limp when lambs walk. Foot rot and foot scald look the same until the hooves of the lamb are trimmed and differences become apparent. Foot rot is a contagious bacterial infection of the hoof. It causes a foul-smelling odor and a soft, necrotic appearance of the sole of the hoof. Sheep with chronic cases of foot rot generally stay thin and are more likely to get other problems. Infected lambs should be isolated from noninfected lambs. Vaccines that prevent foot rot are available, but you should talk to a veterinarian to determine the best treatment.

Foot scald is a noncontagious infection. Foot scald may seem to be contagious when several lambs are housed together in the damp, muddy conditions that encourage foot scald. Trimming the feet of lambs infected with foot scald reveals a hoof with normal appearance and texture. The abnormality is on the inside of the claws (toes). Foot scald infection is found between the two claws, not in the hoof as with foot rot. Because foot scald is not contagious, lambs being treated can be kept together with other lambs in a dry pen or pasture. Talk to your veterinarian to determine a treatment plan.

Rectal Prolapse

If you find a lamb with a prolapsed rectum, you should call your veterinarian to help you treat the lamb. It is important to care for the lamb as soon as possible before the situation worsens. Rectal prolapse can be caused by short tail docking; straining to eat from troughs on an incline; coughing from a respiratory condition; diarrhea; or eating a highly concentrated, dusty, or moldy feed.

Respiratory Problems

Dusty feeds and housing conditions, plant pollens, and viral diseases may cause nasal discharge that varies from watery to white or yellow. Changes in weather often trigger hacking coughs in lambs. If you allow the cough to continue untreated, the lamb can develop a rectal prolapse. This condition can reduce a lamb's show value or cause death.

Digestive System Problems

During hot, humid weather, lambs tend to go "stale" and off of feed. Irregular feeding times, amounts, and types of feed can lead to lambs going off feed or missing a meal. This might lead to the lamb overeating at the next meal, causing indigestion and low appetite for the next couple of days. You may need to treat persistent scouring and indigestion with sodium bicarbonate that you can mix in the feed to buffer the stomach. You can also treat scouring with antibiotics, but you should talk to your veterinarian first. It is very important to stick to a consistent feeding pattern when feeding lambs. Feed lambs about the same time each day. Give them the same amount and type of feed each day. If you need to change a ration, make the change gradually until the lamb eats the new ration entirely. Start by mixing the new ration into the old ration over a few days. Slowly increase the amount of new feed in the ration until the lamb is completely on the new feed.

Urinary Calculi (Water Belly)

Urinary calculi, or water belly, is a problem in male sheep (rams and wethers) when the salts normally cast off in urine form stones that stay in the kidney, bladder, or urethra. This condition happens when the calcium to phosphorus ratio approaches one to one. Typically, the ratio of calcium to phosphorus in the feed should be two parts calcium to one part phosphorus. Check the ingredients on the feed tag to determine this ratio.

A lamb with urinary calculi kicks at its stomach, stands with its back arched, switches its tail, strains to urinate or dribbles urine, and constantly lies down and gets back up. A lamb can recover if it passes the stone. But blockage of the urinary tract causes pain and can cause death if the bladder bursts into the body cavity. If you catch water belly early enough, a veterinarian can drain the bladder to relieve the pressure and try to save the lamb. Rations that include ammonium chloride can help prevent urinary calculi.

Contagious Ecthyma (Sore Mouth)

Sore mouth, a common condition of sheep and goats, is a viral disease that can affect the skin and mucus membranes around the lips, legs, esophagus, and rumen wall. Sore mouth may cause thick, crusty spots that bleed when peeled off. Affected lambs may appear to be depressed and reluctant to eat. Talk to your veterinarian about treatment options. Most lambs heal within 1 to 4 weeks, but some may take longer. In these cases, the lamb may lose a lot of weight because of its reluctance to eat.

Humans can get sore mouth, so always wear rubber or vinyl gloves when treating infected sheep. Vaccines are available against sore mouth. Talk with your veterinarian about prevention.

Eye Problems

A watery, yellow discharge usually indicates an eye infection and requires treatment with broad-spectrum antibiotic eye ointments twice daily for several days. It could also indicate that something is stuck in the eye. Examine the eye for a seed or piece of debris and talk to your veterinarian.

Copper Poisoning

Lambs are sensitive to copper. Copper in the diet at a level of 25 parts per million can lead to a chronic level of accumulation and then a sudden onset of a disease that looks like leptospirosis. Between 1 and 5 percent of affected sheep have anemia, red urine, and jaundice, which often lead to death. Do not supply trace minerals containing copper to lambs unless you also add molybdenum at 1 part molybdenum to 10 parts copper. Salt offered for free-choice feeding should not contain trace minerals.

Ovine Dermatosis (Club Lamb Fungus)

Club lamb fungus is most common in lambs prepared for shows. It is contagious to humans. This is a very hardy fungus that can live for years in barns where there is no direct sunlight. Symptoms of club lamb fungus include wounds that can appear anywhere but are usually found on the head, neck, and back. Lesions first appear as small, circular spots about the size of a dime to a 50-cent piece. Infected skin is thick, irritated, red, and weeping. Lesions appear 2 to 4 weeks after infection. Wool regrowth is usually black. All stages of the fungus are contagious until wool regrowth has begun.

Topical fungicides can help reduce the spread of the disease. Contact your veterinarian for treatment options. To help prevent club lamb fungus, keep lambs and stalls as dry as possible. Disinfect equipment with fungicide. Naturally occurring lanolin discourages club lamb fungus, so do not wash and shear show lambs often. Always wear protective gloves when handling infected sheep.

Final Thoughts on Lamb Healthcare Management

Disease prevention is an important part of having healthy lambs. It is much easier to keep a lamb from getting sick than it is to get a sick lamb healthy again. Lambs develop a daily routine. It is important to watch lambs every day for symptoms of disease or other infection. It is especially important to watch your lambs while they are eating. A sick lamb will eat slower or just pick at the feed. As soon as you notice any difference in lamb behavior, it is time to find the problem. The sooner you find the problem, the sooner you can start treatment.

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