

Investigating Lean Ewes

After weaning, it's not uncommon to identify a proportion of ewes which are leaner than the rest of the flock. Once obvious issues such as lameness and broken mouths have been excluded you might expect additional feeding to be enough to improve things. But what should you do when this doesn't have the expected effect on body condition?

There are a number of potential problems which could be responsible – most of these fall into a group of untreatable conditions known as “iceberg diseases”. These are so-called because when they are present in a flock you will often find a handful of poor-doers as a result, but there is a much bigger unseen impact on productivity. Three of these diseases are outlined below.

Johne's Disease

This condition rarely manifests with scour in sheep, unlike its classic presentation in cattle. Affected animals are bright and eat well, but gradually lose weight, eventually developing bottle jaw in end-stage disease. Although these sheep pick up the infection in early life, they will not show signs until they are over two years of age. They shed the infectious organism in dung and therefore commonly infect their own lambs and others in the group. These sheep are also a potential source of infection for cattle on the same holding. Control schemes are available.

OPA (Jaagsiekte)

This chronic disease is caused by a virus and results in tumours developing in the lungs. Most commonly, signs develop at three to four years of age, with affected animals often bright despite their weight loss. In later stages they may develop harsh breathing and a foamy nasal discharge. Spread is through nose-to-nose contact as well as through milk. This condition can only be diagnosed by testing at postmortem examination, but once confirmed in a flock ultrasound screening may be useful to detect and cull cases early in the course of disease.

Maedi visna (MV)

Another viral condition, this disease can manifest in several different ways including ill thrift, pneumonia, mastitis and sometimes progressive limb weakness. Like OPA, signs tend to manifest in animals over three years of age. The virus is highly infectious, with spread occurring through nose-to-nose contact, particularly in shared air spaces, or in milk. Control schemes are available.

Action To Take

If you find unexplained poor doers at this stage, now is the time to investigate. Trying to nurse these animals through tugging and another winter may risk further spread of a disease problem through the flock, and they are unlikely to be productive. Discuss possible approaches with your veterinary surgeon – for some diseases it can be helpful to blood sample a group of thin sheep, while there can also be great value in culling three or four of them for postmortem examination, either by your own vet or via SRUC Veterinary Services. A thorough investigation is the starting point for control of the problem, so you can maximise future productivity.