

Preventing Lameness

Lameness is a massive issue, having a serious impact on welfare and productivity. In addition to the animal's suffering, the pain leads to reduced feeding and reduced milk yields. Taking steps to minimise the occurrence of lameness will benefit both your stock and your pocket. The major causes of lameness in sheep include scald, footrot and CODD (contagious ovine digital dermatitis). These conditions are caused by bacteria and **can be easily spread between animals**, particularly in wet conditions. It is much better to prevent a lameness problem than to try and fix one once it has developed. Basic steps to minimise spread of infection include:

- Target **high-traffic areas** such as feeders and gateways for surface improvements, disinfection, and drainage.
- **Observe good hygiene** when handling sheep, particularly when treating feet.
- Disinfecting equipment after each use is important.
- Lambs become infected by ewes, so paying attention to hygiene and lameness issues in the main flock has a knock-on beneficial effect.

Footbaths can be useful in preventing scald, a mild infection often causing lameness in lambs. However, footbathing also has the potential to spread infection, unless carried out carefully and hygienically.

Footbath tips

- Footbaths can help prevent scald but are **not suitable for treating a lameness problem**.
- Think about contact time – can you accommodate animals standing in the bath for a period, in which case a gentle product like zinc sulphate can be used, or do you need to use a walk-through product such as formalin?
- **Pay attention to the instructions** – too weak and it won't work, too strong and it will damage the skin, possibly letting infection in.
- Mud and soil contamination will stop some footbaths from working, and increase infection risk – try to run the group through clean water first. Replenish the footbath according to the instructions.
- Wherever possible hold the treated sheep on hard-standing to dry before turnout.
- Dispose of the footbath correctly according to instructions.

Lame animals require **prompt isolation** (to prevent spread to other sheep), individual examination and treatment. **Foot-trimming is no longer recommended** as it spreads infection and increases pain, making the problem even worse. It is very important that you **correctly diagnose the cause of the lameness** so the correct treatment can be given, and so you should **ask your vet** for help. **Developing a plan** to address lameness in your flock, including targeted treatment, culling and vaccination, can pay dividends in improved health and productivity.