



Food Animal Initiative

ENVIRONMENTS FIT FOR ANIMALS FIT FOR THEIR ENVIRONMENT

FAI Technical Datasheet - What can we do about lameness in sheep? - S3

Lameness in sheep is one of the most common issues raised by animal welfare groups and the general public as it is a very visual condition for persons in the countryside. There are various causes of lameness in sheep, some of which can be prevented and some for which reliable prevention is currently unavailable. Traditional methods of foot care have not produced a significant reduction in lameness in flocks for most shepherds.

'.... the facts'

Sheep originate from the foothills of glaciers where the ground is relatively stony, cold and dry compared to that occupied by many commercial flocks. Lamé ewes do not graze as effectively as sound ewes and rapidly lose condition.

Lameness is a time consuming condition to treat for man and a stressful condition for sheep. The most common causes of lameness in sheep readily recognised by shepherds are scald, footrot, digital dermatitis and sole/joint/skin infections.

Scald is one of the most common causes of lameness in sheep and cannot be reliably prevented. Treatment is by footbathing/spraying/antibiotics.

Footrot in sheep is caused by a combination of two organisms, one of which only survives lives on the foot and one which lives in the soil. Thus is possible to control by treatments such as paring/footbathing/antibiotics and a disease break created by leaving pasture sheep free for 14 days (foot living organism will not survive).

Contagious ovine digital dermatitis (CODD) is a relatively new condition in the UK and affected animals have severe claw damage and take several weeks to recover.

Recent research has shown that individual management of lame sheep is associated with a low prevalence of footrot and that routine foot trimming was associated with a high prevalence of footrot.¹

Anecdotally closed flocks have lower incidence of lameness.

Score	Signs	Action
1	Slight lameness one leg - no visible signs of distress.	Observe, note ID and if no improvement catch and examine in 2 days.
2	Holding leg off the ground, visible signs of damage and/or physical signs of distress.	Catch, examine, treat, record treatment in medicines book (even if just pare), mark ewe and record type of lameness.
3	Stilted gait due to lameness in more than one leg.	As above. Repeat examination and treatment in 2 days if no improvement.

'.....solutions at FAI'

The first step is to accurately assess the lameness levels in the flock and have a plan in order to deal with the problems in an organised manner. This is achieved using a simple table (see above) in conjunction with the notes below.

Physical signs of distress are indicated by;

- Lying down frequently and for long periods
- Constant turning round to nibble at the affected area
- Shaking of the leg

Visible signs of lameness are indicated by;

- Overgrown foot
- Wound
- Skin breakage as in dermatitis
- Other leg damage

Lameness levels have also been reduced by lowering stocking densities under environmental schemes (max 3 ewes with lambs per acre) and preventing contact of ewes feet with soil as far as possible e.g. muddy gateways, open swards etc

DEFRA Booklet lameness in sheep PB 1149 available from DEFRA Publications Admail 6000, London SW1A 2XX
1. LE Green et al 2003 Vet Rec March 22 pp351-358 Risk factors associated with footrot in sheep.



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