

Mastitis in Ewes

As in cattle, mastitis in ewes is an inflammation of the udder and is usually caused by bacterial infection, in the case of sheep mainly by *Staphylococci* and *Mannhaemia (Pasteurella)*. With the prevalence in UK flocks between 0 and 5%, the condition presents a serious welfare and economic problem on some farms. At best, affected ewes fail to recover milk production; at worst, ewes die. It also results in increased or premature culling, and lamb growth rates will be reduced through interrupted milk supply.

Symptoms

Symptoms include abnormal milk and udder changes (swollen in acute mastitis; shrunken or lumpy when chronic). In per-acute cases, the ewe is ill due to bacterial toxins and the udder may slough off. Mastitis tends to occur in the first month post-lambing but may not be detected until much later in chronic cases. Lameness may be an early sign, while a blind teat at lambing is likely to reflect a missed case from the previous year.

Risk Factors

The key risk factor for mastitis developing in an udder is damage to teat skin, through which bacteria can gain entry. This may occur due to hungry lambs (whose teeth damage teat skin), orf, or chapping. Other risk factors include poor udder conformation – especially teat length and udder drop – low body condition score (BCS), greater litter size and increased age. It is more common in indoor flocks, but symptoms may be more severe in outdoor flocks.

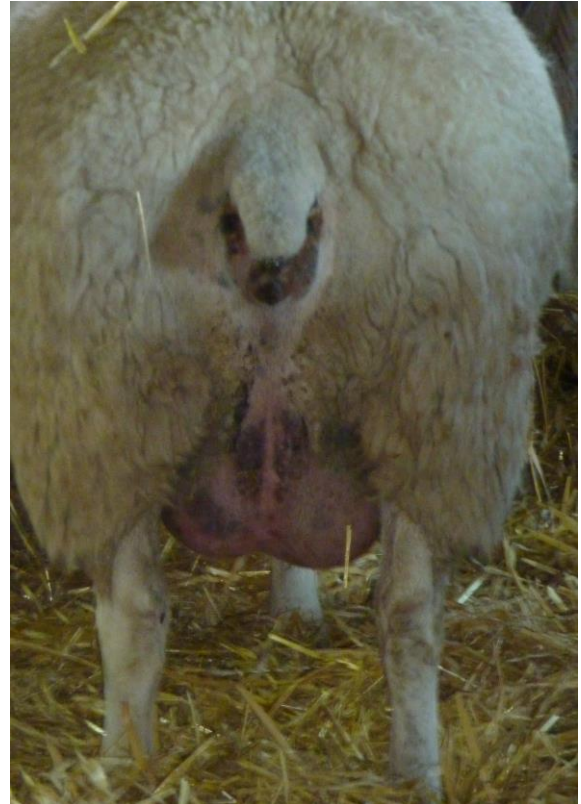
Treatment

Treatment should involve anti-inflammatory pain relief and antibiotics. The aim is more often to save the ewe's life than to achieve full recovery, as the damage to the udder is likely to be permanent. Prevention is therefore much preferable to cure.



Prevention Strategies

- **Good nutrition** is crucial: ewes should be in BCS 3 at lambing and receive sufficient feed in the first 6 weeks post lambing. First-time lambers require particularly close management.
- **Prevent teat damage:** Consider creep feeding lambs from 3-4 weeks and avoid ewes rearing triplets; if applicable, devise a control programme for orf; avoid chilling (which leads to chapping) at turnout by providing shelter, not docking ewes' tails too short etc
- **Manage weaning:** remove both lambs at once and keep ewes on a reduced diet, far away from lambs
- **Culling:** Ewes affected by mastitis should be permanently identified and subsequently culled, as should ewes beyond their 5-6th lamb crop.
- **Biosecurity:** less commonly, Maedi-Visna can be a cause of mastitis so consider buying from accredited flocks
- **Hygiene** is important: not just housing conditions, but also one's hands!
- **Vaccination** is possible. High risk ewes (typically young ewes and ewes bearing triplets) should be dosed at 5 and 2 weeks pre-lambing.



Key points

- Mastitis in ewes can have severe welfare and economic implications
- Affected flocks have increased culling rates and suffer reduced lamb growth
- Avoiding damage to teat skin is key to preventing the condition
- Treatment is rarely able to save the udder
- Prevention should be readily attainable and is by far the best approach