

Dealing with Sheep Scab through the lambing season



Sheep Scab can become more apparent in flocks during the lambing season, particularly as ewes are brought into close proximity in groups and are monitored more intensely. Mite populations can build up under wool in the winter, and the combination of the demands of pregnancy, poor weather and itching caused by the scab mite can lead to rapid loss in appetite and body condition. This leaves the ewe vulnerable to twin-lamb disease as well as having a poor supply of colostrum at the point of lambing and lambs of lower than expected birthweights.

Feeding at troughs or housing sheep creates ideal conditions for the rapid spread of the sheep scab mite through the flock and from one batch of sheep to the next. The mite can readily be transferred on clothing to sheep, for example, during direct contact at feeding.

Sheep scab can present with obvious restlessness in the flock, scratching against fence posts, stained areas of wool, a pulled wool appearance leading to wool loss, and head tossing or attempted biting. Correct diagnosis is essential, as there are similarities in the clinical signs seen in cases of sheep scab mites and lice, however treatments will differ.

Left unchecked, any scab in a flock will rapidly transfer to the lambs as they are born and it will be necessary to treat all the lambs as well as the ewes. Outbreaks in flocks on the cusp of lambing or during lambing present challenges to the use of OP dips, given the young age of lambs. In general, dipping can be undertaken safely in pregnant sheep, however it is essential not to rush the process. Ewes should be gently lowered into and assisted through and out of the bath and any lambs should be dipped separately from ewes. Dip is not suitable for sheep that are being milked for human consumption.

The ewes will have protection for 60 days so optimal timing must be considered, for example, it may be worth waiting for a short time until all lambs are born and are a manageable size. Injectable products are available but, particularly at this time of year, consideration must be given to using a product with sufficient persistence of effect, as truly scab free fields and sheds to house sheep in after treatment need to be identified as mites can survive in the environment for up to 17 days. Accurate treatment of every sheep is essential and the chances of some of the mites being resistant to the injectable products must not be underestimated. The repeated use of injectable products is likely to increase the selection of injectable resistant internal and external parasites on farms. Flockowners should limit their use wherever this is possible to maintain their effectiveness.