



Iceberg Diseases Bulletin #1

What Are Iceberg Diseases?

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There are five key iceberg diseases of concern to sheep flocks across the UK and Ireland. These are diseases that are difficult to detect and diagnose, as sheep showing obvious clinical signs are usually just the 'tip of the iceberg'.

For every ewe that looks visibly unwell, there may be many more infected sheep beneath the surface that appear normal.

These diseases have a long incubation period (years), mainly affect adult ewes, spread silently within the flock and reduce productivity before obvious illness is seen.

Initial, subtle impacts may include reduced scanning percentage, increased barren ewes, lower lamb birth weights, reduced milk yield, higher cull rates and increased lamb mortality.

By the time disease becomes noticeable, a significant proportion of the flock may already be affected.

The following bulletins will briefly summarise each iceberg disease, for more detail please visit the iceberg diseases section of the AHWNI website.

Why Are They a Concern in Northern Ireland?

Prevalence data for iceberg diseases across the UK and Ireland is limited because:

- They are underdiagnosed
- Clinical signs are often mistaken for 'poor doers'
- Testing is not routinely carried out
- Post-mortem examination is underused

However, evidence suggests several of these diseases already have a strong foothold in many flocks.

How Do Iceberg Diseases Impact Your Flock?

General economic impacts may include:

- Reduced lifetime productivity
- Reduce productivity/viability of lambs
- Increased veterinary costs
- Higher replacement rates
- Loss of breeding reputation
- Reduced flock value/cull ewe value

The Five Main Iceberg Diseases of Sheep

- Maedi Visna (MV)
- Ovine Johne's Disease (OJD)
- Ovine Pulmonary Adenocarcinoma (OPA)
- Caseous Lymphadenitis (CLA)
- Border Disease (BD)

Why Early Awareness Matters

Because there is no treatment for these diseases, prevention and early detection are critical.

Key actions include:

- Careful purchasing policy- buying from accredited or known health-status flocks
- Quarantine procedures
- Post-mortem examination of unexplained deaths
- Diagnostic testing where suspicion exists
- Good biosecurity management

Once established, eradication is difficult, costly, and sometimes unrealistic without long-term management.