



March Sheep Health

AHWNl Flock Health Focus - Hygiene at Lambing- Quick Wins to Improve Health

Why Hygiene is Key

Hygiene is a key factor at lambing that can decrease lamb mortality and reduce antibiotic use.

Key diseases that can infect young lambs are watery mouth, joint ill and scours. These are caused by bacteria that can enter the lamb's system via the navel, ingestion or tailing and tagging wounds. These diseases can be fatal to lambs, with variable treatment success, and can also have a knock-on effect on lamb production.

Antibiotics should not be used as a preventative measure for these diseases, these can contribute to resistance building on your farm, meaning when an animal is ill and really needs antibiotics that they may not work. Excellent hygiene coupled along with good colostrum management are much more effective prevention methods. A study published in 2024 using an online questionnaire with responses from 322 sheep farmers across the UK found that despite using antibiotics as a preventative measure in their flock, 40% of these farms still had joint ill outbreaks.

Keep Bedding Clean

Keeping a clean straw bed as much as possible is essential to minimise bacteria building up in the environment. Dirty bedding, containing faecal material and birth/abortion fluids, is a breeding ground for bacteria, which can multiply rapidly; exposing a newborn, naive lamb to a high level of challenge such as this will result in fatalities. A clean bed will protect young lambs from bacteria entering through the navel, but also by keeping ewes clean there will be a reduced chance of spread when lambs suck the ewe. Crutching ewes pre-lambing by removing wool from around the udder and vulva can be beneficial to reduce faecal and blood contamination around these areas.

Recommended practice is to clean and disinfect housing before lambing. If ewes have been housed for a few weeks prior, cleaning out the bedding, allowing it to dry and disinfecting the area a few days prior to lambing will help to get rid of any bacteria that have been building up. Lime is commonly used as well as other liquid disinfectants. Keep bedding clean at all times when ewes are lambing, through fresh bedding and ensuring all cleanings are removed after lambing, you should be able to kneel down onto the bedding and keep dry. Avoid lambing in very small pens as these can quickly get dirty.

If possible, clean out lambing pens after every ewe. Where this is not possible, lime can be applied on top of the old bedding before fresh straw is applied, which can help to reduce bacteria. Lime is an irritant and must not be inhaled or have direct contact with skin, when applying ensure you are wearing full PPE including a mask, safety goggles and ensuring skin is fully covered. As well as irritating human skin, it can also be an irritant to sheep teats and skin. While lime is used widely across sheep farms, it is important to consider that there are other dry powder product alternatives that can work as well as lime without the risk of chemical burns.

If there are cases of disease such as scour or foot infection (footrot or CODD) it's important to identify and isolate these animals to reduce spread, as well as cleaning and disinfecting the areas they have been in. Disease can spread very quickly within housing compared to when flocks are grazing outside.

Effective Management of Abortions

In the event of an abortion, it's important that this is dealt with quickly and hygienically.

Ewes that have aborted must be isolated from the rest of the flock immediately. Any contaminated bedding, fluids, placenta and the dead lamb must be removed as quickly as possible, ideally before any other ewes or lambs can come into contact with these, as this is how infection may spread.

Thoroughly clean and disinfect the area where abortion has occurred to ensure the organisms cannot be passed onto other ewes.

It's important to investigate the cause of any abortions, ideally through submitting the lamb and the placenta for post-mortem examination. By identifying the cause, you will be able to determine if there is an appropriate vaccine to use in the following year. There are different organisms that can cause abortion; in some cases the initial year post infection may only have a few abortions but the year following often results in an abortion storm which can be devastating.

Protecting Human Health

It's important to be aware that sheep may have zoonotic diseases, which means that they can be passed on to humans. As some of these diseases can cause acute, life-threatening illnesses and possible stillbirths or miscarriages, it's vital that pregnant women should avoid contact with sheep around lambing time and avoid contact with potentially infective material, for example on clothing or boots that may have been in contact with ewes and lambs. More information on the risks to pregnant women during lambing can be found in guidance recently issued by HSENI.

Navel Management

Navels (where the umbilical cord connected the developing lamb to the placenta) provide direct access to bacteria to enter and spread inside the newborn lamb. It is vital to disinfect the lamb's navel when it is born. Ideally this should be repeated 4-6 hours later, especially if the navel has not dried. Iodine is the traditional disinfectant used for this job, although there are now different products on the market that have shown success. The treatment acts as an antiseptic for bacteria, and also helps to dry the navel which will give bacteria less chance to enter as it closes up. Navels can be sprayed or dipped, dipping has been recommended as the superior method, as you can get better coverage of the whole navel by using a dip cup. If spraying, ensure you spray from different angles to ensure there is sufficient coverage.

Cleaning and Sterilisation of Equipment

Attention to detail with both feeding and lambing equipment is essential to keep lambs healthy. Equipment must be both cleaned and sterilised: ideally any dirt should be removed from equipment first, followed by sterilising fluid, to ensure bacteria are killed. Sterilisation is the preferred method to disinfection as this ensures that all microorganisms are killed, while disinfection will not kill all microorganisms but does reduce them to a safe level.

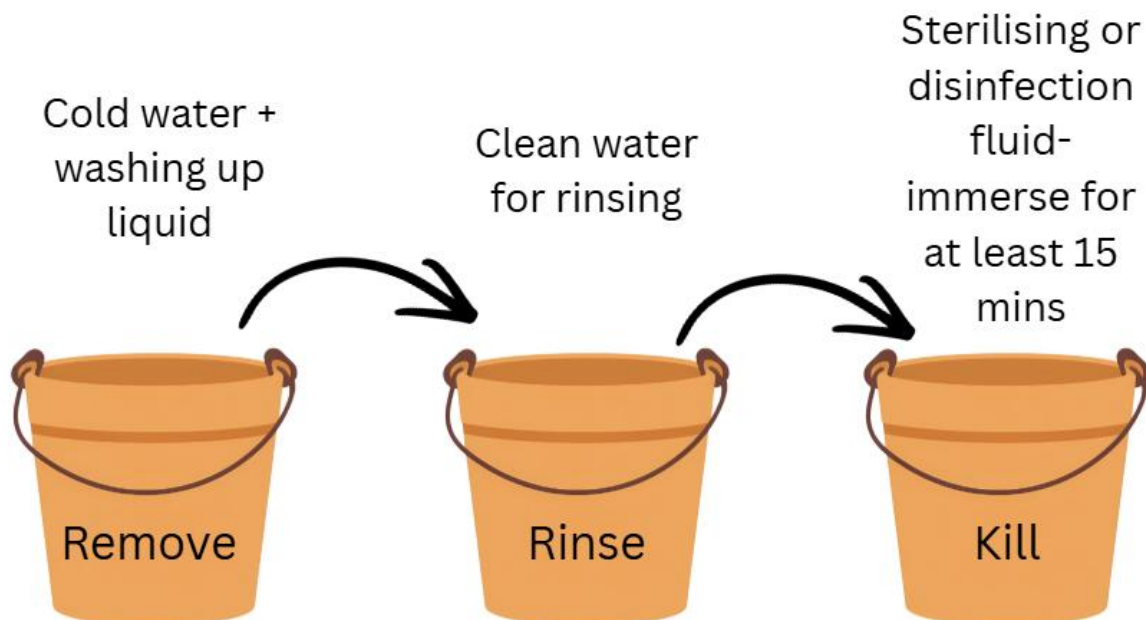
Cleaning and sterilisation can be easily performed using the three bucket rule:

- *Bucket 1- Remove:* begin by washing all equipment in cold water and washing up liquid, removing any visible dirt or milk from the equipment. This step physically removes bacteria and organic matter.
- *Bucket 2- Rinse:* dip equipment into clean water in this bucket to rinse and remove any remaining detergent and loosened debris. Residual organic matter or soap can sometimes reduce the effectiveness of disinfectant solutions, therefore removing them is essential for the final step.
- *Bucket 3- Kill:* fully immerse the equipment in sterilising fluid, leave it for at least 15 minutes, which should be sufficient time for sterilisation. This step is essential, the first step acts to reduce the bacterial load, but will not kill all bacteria present. Sterilisation will kill all microorganisms but needs a clean surface to work.



Three Bucket Rule

Three Buckets Today- fewer losses tomorrow



If these three buckets are set up each day during lambing this can make it quick and easy to move each piece of equipment through each bucket.

Equipment that may not be regularly cleaned is ear tagging, tail docking and castration devices. It is important to remember that these can be a source of bacteria gaining access to the lamb.

Importance of Stock Keeper Hygiene

The main focus of lambing hygiene rests on keeping the environment and equipment clean, however the hygiene of the stock keeper handling the animals is not to be underestimated.

A UK study from 2024 surveying sheep farmers found that farms with stock keepers who reported regularly washing their hands as protocol after any handling of animals or lambing had fewer outbreaks of joint ill on farm. Bacteria can easily spread from human skin to lambs, therefore this must be considered at all times.

Disposable gloves should be used during all handling of ewes and lambs, not just lambing. These act as a physical barrier- preventing bacteria on your skin transferring to the lamb. Bacterial load on gloves will be less than on your hands, as bacteria find it easier to stick to skin around creases and nails, while gloves have a smooth surface making it harder for bacteria to stick. While gloves should carry a reduced bacterial load, it is still important to change them regularly throughout the day as dirt builds up onto them.

It is also recommended to clean and disinfect your own clothing (waterproofs) regularly as bacteria can be transferred from dirt on your clothes directly to the lamb during handling- thinking particularly about when you are spraying navels, tubing or getting lambs to suck.