



May Sheep Health

AHWNl Flock Health Focus: Tips at Grazing to Improve Sheep Health

With the weather improving and grass growth on the rise, the labours of lambing time can become thoughts of the past; watching ewes and lambs thriving at grass can be a real pleasure when the weather is good. However, health challenges can still occur at grazing throughout the spring and summer months, so it is important to be aware of potential problems and to plan accordingly.

Preventing Grass Tetany

Grass tetany is most commonly seen in the spring when ewes are turned out onto lush pastures. It is an often fatal disorder and is caused by low magnesium levels in the blood.

A number of factors can contribute to the risk, including:

- Poor weather conditions- especially very wet spells that reduce the ewe's ability to absorb nutrients from the grass, due to fast passage through the gut
- Rapidly growing grass in the springtime is typically low in magnesium
- Acidic soils may have a lower availability of magnesium
- Rapid grass growth with high levels of potassium- potassium, especially applied at a high rate, can reduce magnesium uptake by the sward
- A drop in rumen pH, such as may occur when rapidly fermentable carbohydrates are fed, for example grains, can decrease the absorption of magnesium
- Stress- ewes can be under stress due to bad weather, disease, poor nutrition and are also under more nutritional stress when they're lactating, particularly in the first 6-7 weeks of lactation.

It is essential that this disease is caught in the early stages for treatment to be successful, although sudden death is a frequent occurrence with this condition. Symptoms include: a stiff gait, nervousness, staggering, twitching, recumbency and kicking with muscle tremors. Any ewe found in this state can be treated with a combined magnesium and calcium solution (always get advice from your private vet), warmed to body temperature, and injected subcutaneously across multiple sites. Always read the product data sheet to ensure you do not exceed the maximum recommended volume at an injection site and use sterile needles. Otherwise abscesses, tissue damage and reduced treatment efficiency may result.

Methods of preventing grass tetany:

- High mag buckets- leaving one out may not be sufficient to ensure every ewe gains an adequate intake; set blocks out in a few different locations. Blocks may also need to be wetted when they get very dry, which will also encourage intakes.
- Add Cal-Mag into sheep meal- consult with your nutritional advisor
- High magnesium nuts may be useful on high risk farms, particularly during bad weather
- Magnesium bolus- these boluses can be useful but in high risk situations may not release the optimal amount of magnesium required per day.

Do not rely on treating drinking water with magnesium as a prevention method. Sheep often do not drink enough water to allow them to consume enough magnesium.

Avoid feeding rams with concentrates supplemented with magnesium, as this can cause them to develop stones in the urinary tract. Rams are at a lower risk of developing grass tetany as they don't have the stress of lactation as ewes do. A mineral block can be left out but consumption must be closely monitored to avoid complications resulting from excessive magnesium intake.



WATCH OUT FOR GRASS TETANY IN SHEEP



GRASS TETANY
(hypomagnesaemia)
is a potentially fatal condition caused by low magnesium levels, often when sheep are grazing lush, rapidly growing pasture.

RECOGNISE THE SIGNS – ACT FAST

Grass tetany can strike quickly, often with no warning.



MUSCLE TREMORS

Shivering or trembling, especially around the head and neck.



EXCITEMENT / NERVOUSNESS

Restless, unsettled, or easily startled.



WEAKNESS

Staggering, unsteady on feet, may separate from the mob.



RECUMBENCY

Sheep lie down and may find it hard to get up.



CONVULSIONS / FITS

Severe cases may have muscle spasms or full convulsions.



SUDDEN DEATH

Can die suddenly without showing signs.



ACT IMMEDIATELY

If you suspect grass tetany:

- Move sheep to drier, less lush pasture.
- Handle quietly.
- Provide a magnesium supplement (bolus, drench or lick).
- Treat with magnesium injection at body temperature (subcutaneously).
- Get veterinary advice.

HIGH RISK CONDITIONS

- ✓ Lush, rapidly growing pasture
- ✓ High nitrogen fertiliser
- ✓ Wet weather
- ✓ Lactating ewes
- ✓ Early spring



Avoid over-fertilised pastures.



Be extra cautious in risky weather conditions.



Provide magnesium supplements during high-risk periods.



Ensure clean, fresh water is always available.



IT CAN HAPPEN FAST. DON'T LOSE SHEEP.

Know the signs.
Act quickly.
Save lives.



Animal Health & Welfare NI

Sheep Health

Grazing Strategies for Reducing Worm Burdens

As it gets warmer, infective larvae will begin to hatch and there can be an abundance of these on pasture. High worm burdens in lambs can impact performance and in severe cases health, and are not always easy to keep on top of despite treatments. Dosing lambs can also be a time-consuming process and therefore methods to reduce the amount of times they need to be dosed can result in a big saving on labour.

There are several different grazing strategies that can be utilised to reduce worm burdens building up in pasture and the number of infective larvae to which lambs are exposed.

Grouping lambs by age

Keeping lambs in batches according to their age can be useful in ensuring that dosing timing is correct. For example, dosing lambs together that are a month apart in age could mean the younger lambs are dosed too early, before they have picked up any worm challenge, leaving them more susceptible to disease challenge a few weeks later.

Mixed grazing

While AHWNI does not recommend grazing cattle and sheep together due to disease risks, using the two different species grazing intermittently to reduce worm burdens can be useful. Cattle can Hoover up parasites that are harmful to sheep and will effectively remove them as most parasites are host specific, therefore if those affecting sheep are ingested by cattle, they will not be able to complete their life cycle in their natural host.

AHWNI recommends that knowing the Johne's Disease and BVD virus history of your cattle is important, as these diseases can be transferred to sheep. Rather than grazing both species at the same time, occasionally following cattle with sheep can be a useful technique that will also make management easier.

Rotational/Paddock Grazing

Rotational or 'paddock' grazing can be used not only to improve grass utilisation and growth but also can improve sheep health. The idea of this is to regularly move the sheep rather than leaving them to graze one pasture for weeks. By dividing fields into smaller 'paddocks', this can allow regular moves and longer rest periods.

By aiming to move sheep every 3 days, this reduces the chance of them ingesting hatched larvae on the pasture and reduces pasture contamination. Ideally, the pasture should then be left for 3 weeks before animals return to graze it. The typical life cycle of a sheep gut worm is approximately 3 weeks, if the larvae cannot find a host after hatching, they will eventually die.

Always aim to keep sward height above at least 4cm, as 80-90% of larvae can be found below this, so the tighter pasture is grazed, the more likely it is that sheep will pick up a higher concentration of larvae. By practising careful monitoring, this can also aid in quicker grass recovery following grazing.

Leader-Follower System

Following weaning, rotational/paddock grazing can be adapted into a 'leader-follower' system. This allows lambs, which have the highest nutritional demand, to graze pasture first and ensures that they graze forage when it is at its highest quality. Dry stock such as ewes can then be used to 'follow' the lambs and graze the pasture down to a lower level.

This has a number of benefits for reducing worm burdens in lambs:

- Lambs only eat the higher parts of the grass, reducing their chance of coming into contact with larvae
- Older ewes have some level of resistance to parasites, therefore can manage better when ingesting worms, and often will shed very few eggs as their immune system effectively kills the parasites. If they are grazing the lower section of the sward they can reduce the worm burden of the pasture for lambs grazing it again.

Weaning

Weaning time can cause stress to lambs, and therefore also a drop in immunity, making them susceptible to parasite infection. In order to mitigate this, newly weaned lambs could be put out to silage/hay aftermath. The process of cutting silage can reduce worm burdens, making pasture relatively safe for lambs to graze.

Ensuring that they are eating creep feed pre-weaning can also aid in reducing stress, as they are less reliant on their mothers for nutrition and are better able to cope with the change

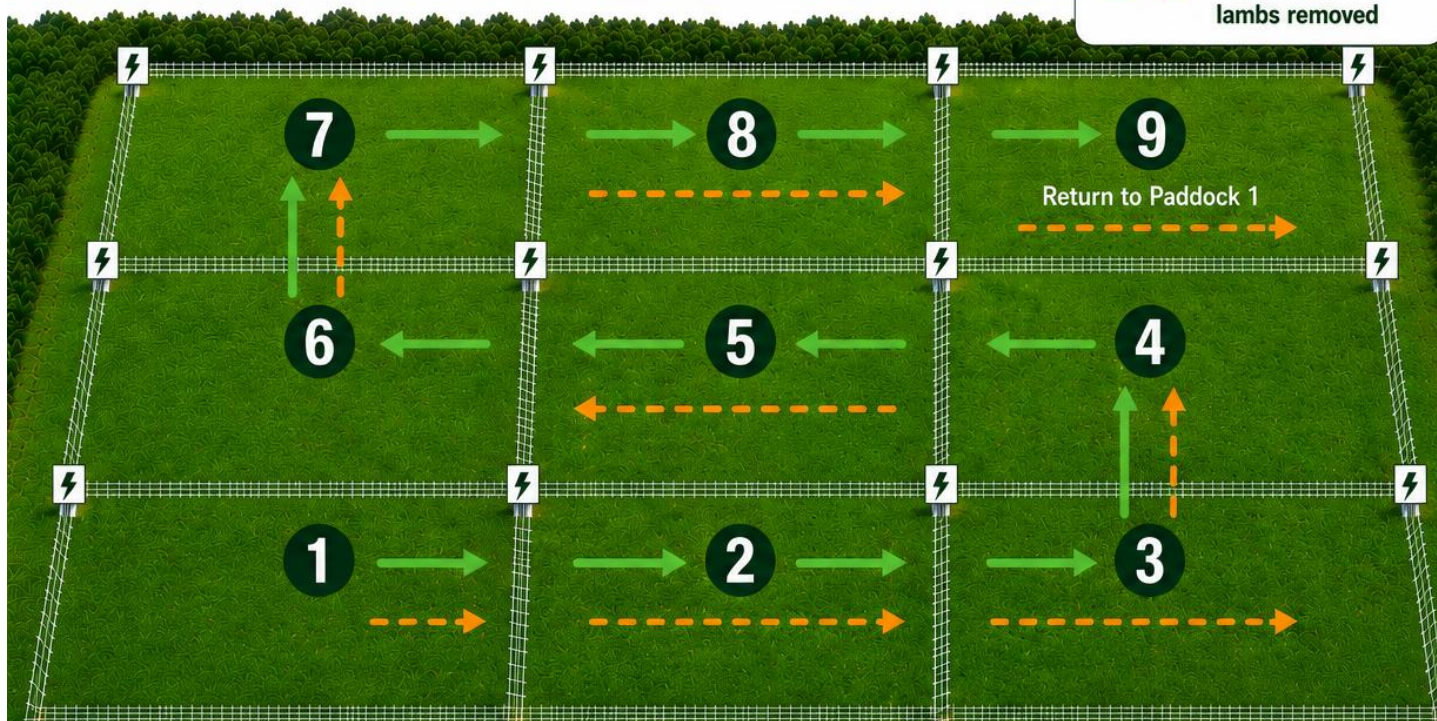


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9 PADDOCK SYSTEM – LEADER FOLLOWER

Lambs graze first, then moved out.
Ewes graze after lambs have been removed.

- Lambs graze first
- Ewes graze after lambs removed



BENEFITS



Better pasture
utilisation



Lambs get high
quality feed first



Ewes clean up
and fertilise



Breaks parasite
lifecycle



Electric fencing is
portable, affordable
and quick to set up



Simple, low stress,
repeatable system

HOW IT WORKS

- A Lambs graze first**
Lambs graze paddock 1
for max 3 days.



- B Lambs moved out**
Before ewes enter, lambs
are moved to paddock 2.



- C Ewes graze after**
Ewes graze paddock 1
after lambs have been
removed.



- D Move on**
After max 3 days total grazing
(lambs then ewes), both
groups move to the next
paddock in the sequence.
Repeat the circuit.



max 3 DAYS
total grazing time
per paddock

TIPS

- Adjust paddock size to match grazing time (max 3 days total).
- Ensure fresh water available.
- Monitor pasture and animal condition.

