

July Sheep Health

AHWNl Flock Health Focus: Don't Overlook Haemonchus

As the grazing season progresses, many farmers will be carrying out faecal egg counts (FECs) to determine whether worm treatment is needed. While the common stomach worm is usually the main parasite of concern, there are other gastro-intestinal (GI) parasites that can be contributing to parasitic gastroenteritis.

One of them is *Haemonchus contortus*, also known as the barber's pole worm, which is becoming more common across the UK. Although it is still less common in Northern Ireland than in other parts of the UK, it has been identified here and farmers should be aware of the signs, particularly during the latter part of the grazing season.

Not All Worms Cause Scour

One of the biggest differences between *Haemonchus* and other stomach worms is that affected sheep don't usually scour.

Unlike other GI parasites, *Haemonchus* feeds directly on blood from the abomasum (the true stomach). Just ten adult worms can remove around 0.5 ml of blood every day. It doesn't take many worms for this blood loss to become significant. Sheep carrying around 500 worms could lose approximately 25 ml of blood every day, resulting in severe anaemia if left untreated, and in severe cases, death. Both adult and younger animals may be affected.

Clinical signs in acute infections include:

- Pale eye and gum membranes
- Shallow breathing
- Increased heart rate
- Sudden deaths in severe infections

Clinical signs in chronic infections include:

- Poor growth rates and ill thrift
- Bottle jaw (swelling beneath the jaw)
- Weakness and lethargy

Because scour is usually absent, *Haemonchus* infections can easily be mistaken for another problem or simply missed altogether.

A Highly Productive Parasite

One reason *Haemonchus* can spread so quickly is the huge number of eggs it produces. A single female worm can produce between 4,000 and 15,000 eggs every day. For comparison, the common stomach worm produces around 400 eggs per day. This means pasture contamination can build up very quickly if infections are not identified early.

Historically, most cases were seen in the south of England, and this parasite was initially thought to adapt best to warm conditions. However, the parasite has gradually spread northwards and has now been found throughout the UK, including the northeast of Scotland. It was previously thought that *Haemonchus* could only survive the winter inside infected animals, but recent work has shown that it can also survive on pasture under some conditions, including surviving the harsh winters of Scotland. This means infections may begin to appear earlier in the grazing season than previously expected.

The parasite requires moisture to develop. During dry weather, larvae remain trapped within dung until rainfall allows them to migrate onto surrounding pasture. Therefore after a dry, hot period such as we have had in the middle of July, the return of rain may lead to a surge in infections.

Adults Can Be Affected Too

Unlike many GI parasites, *Haemonchus* is not just a problem in lambs.

Adult ewes can also become affected, particularly if they have had little previous exposure to the parasite. This means they may not have developed sufficient immunity to protect them when they encounter the parasite for the first time.

If ewes become anaemic, lose condition or develop bottle jaw during the grazing season, *Haemonchus* should be considered as one of the possible causes.

Investigating the Problem

If *Haemonchus* is suspected, a Faecal Egg Count should be carried out. However, it is important that the sample is speciated (that is, that the exact species is identified), as a standard egg count alone cannot confirm which stomach worm is present.

Very high faecal egg counts can sometimes suggest *Haemonchus*, simply because each female worm produces so many eggs. However, this should not be relied upon as a diagnosis.

The FAMACHA system can also be a useful tool when investigating *Haemonchus*. This is an on-farm tool that compares the colour of the lower eyelid against a specially

designed chart to assess the degree of anaemia. It can help identify which sheep require treatment, therefore reducing unnecessary worming and helping to slow the development of anthelmintic resistance.

As the clinical signs can look similar to chronic liver fluke infection, it is important to investigate both possibilities before deciding on treatment.

Treatment and Control

Most broad-spectrum wormers are effective against *Haemonchus*, while products containing closantel or nitroxynil are narrower-spectrum and can be useful to use to reduce the chance of resistance occurring in other parasite species. Treatment should always be based on veterinary advice and the results of diagnostic testing.

A vaccine against *Haemonchus* is also available through veterinary surgeons under a Special Import Certificate. As immunity is relatively short-lived, booster vaccinations are required approximately every six weeks throughout the grazing season.

Regular faecal egg counts remain one of the best ways to monitor worm burdens throughout the year. Carrying out FECs in ewes before tupping and again before lambing can also help identify problems before they become more widespread within the flock.

Don't Assume Every Worm Causes Scour

One of the most important messages is that not all worm infections present in the same way. If sheep are becoming anaemic, developing bottle jaw or failing to thrive without showing signs of scour, *Haemonchus* should be considered as part of the investigation.

Working with your vet to carry out faecal egg counts, identify the type of parasite present and choose the most appropriate treatment will help protect flock health while also reducing the risk of anthelmintic resistance developing.

HAEMONCHUS CONTORTUS

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER



BLOOD-FEEDING WORM

Feeds on blood in the abomasum. Just 10 worms can remove 0.5 ml of blood per day.



SIGNS TO WATCH OUT FOR

- Pale eyelids and gums
- Bottle jaw
- Weakness
- Poor growth / ill thrift
- Sudden deaths

Scour is usually absent.



HIGH EGG OUTPUT

One female can produce 4,000–10,000 eggs per day (compared to ~400 for brown stomach worm). Pasture can become contaminated very quickly.



EXTENDING ITS RANGE

Found throughout the UK, including Northern Ireland. Can survive the winter on pasture under some conditions.



INVESTIGATE

- Faecal Egg Count (FEC) with speciation is essential
- Very high egg counts may be a clue but not a diagnosis
- Adults can be affected too



1 2 3 4 5

CHECK FOR ANAEMIA

Use the FAMACHA® system to assess eyelid colour and identify sheep that may need treatment.



TREAT AND CONTROL

- Most wormers are effective – closantel and nitroxylnil have specific activity
- Vaccine available under special licence – boosters every 6 weeks
- Good grazing & biosecurity help reduce risk



MONITOR REGULARLY

Carry out FECs throughout the season.

FEC ewes pre-tupping and pre-lambing.



Don't assume every stomach worm causes scour.

If sheep are anaemic, developing bottle jaw or not thriving, think *Haemonchus* and investigate.