



Animal Health & Welfare NI

Sheep Health

Preventing Abortion Storms: Don't Leave Vaccinating Too Late

While for most farmers lambing still seems far in the distance, decisions on flock health made now can have an impact on the success of your lambing. Weaning is a good time to review the overall health of your flock, including body condition of ewes at weaning and the number of lambs weaned. Based on this information, it may be the ideal time to review your flock health plan. An important factor to consider at weaning and pre-tupping is whether vaccination against abortion is required, as these vaccines ideally should be given at least a month pre-tupping.

Why Think About Abortion Now?

Abortion is one of the costliest syndromes affecting the sheep industry. Financial losses include the loss of the lamb, increased barren rates in sheep (due to reabsorbing embryos), supportive antibiotic treatment in the outbreak of an abortion storm and increased replacement rates. Furthermore, it presents a high risk to pregnant women as they can become infected with a range of disease-causing agents that infect the ewes.

There are few effective treatment options available once abortions begin to be seen on farm, therefore prevention through vaccination is the best method to prevent losses during the lambing period.

Could Your Flock Be At Risk?

Even if you have not had abortions in the past, it's important to consider the points below to evaluate whether your flock may now be at risk.

- Have you recently bought in replacements?

*Unless buying from a flock of known health status, there is a high risk that bought-in replacements could be carrying a type of infectious abortion. These can be blood tested to monitor whether they have been exposed to the two main causes of abortion: *Toxoplasma gondii*, the cause of Toxoplasmosis, or *Chlamydia abortus*, the cause of Enzootic Abortion of Ewes (EAE), to ensure you use the correct vaccine. Even if they test as negative, vaccination should not be ruled out and should still be considered.*

- Have you had any issues with abortion in the past?

Most flocks may experience a few abortions, which could be due to underlying issues/conditions within the ewe or stress due to handling/management. However, if the abortion rate reaches over 2% this warrants investigation. Usually in the first year of infection a small percentage of sheep will have abortions/stillbirths, and so major concerns may not be raised, but if the flock is unvaccinated the following year, this can lead to a devastating abortion storm.

- Is your biosecurity sufficient?

If there is a possibility of your flock coming into contact with neighbouring sheep, there will be a risk of spread of infection.

- What is rodent/pest control like on farm?

Rodents are the main reservoirs of toxoplasmosis infection (Toxoplasma gondii is a small protozoan parasite) which is then passed onto cats if they eat infected rodents. Cats can shed millions of oocysts (the infectious stage of the parasite) in their faeces. If cats have access to feeding areas or feed stores, this can put your flock at high risk of toxoplasmosis infection if the flock ingests feed contaminated with cat faeces.

- Did you notice unusually high barren/empty rates at last lambing/scanning?

Toxoplasmosis can cause ewes to reabsorb pregnancies if infected in early pregnancy.

While abortion rates over 2% are the baseline for investigation, it is worth investigating the cause of any abortion that occurs on farm to prevent further losses. Speak to your private vet about submitting samples to a laboratory for diagnostic testing.

Vaccination- Plan Ahead

There are vaccines available for both Toxoplasmosis and EAE. Campylobacter is also a common cause of abortion. However, the vaccine for this is not licensed in the UK and requires a Special Import Certificate. If Campylobacter was diagnosed on your farm and vaccine wasn't discussed at the time, it is important to speak to your vet now about it pre-tupping.

Toxovax is the only vaccine available against toxoplasmosis in the UK, it must be administered at least three weeks pre-tupping in order to ensure full immunity by early pregnancy. Live EAE vaccines can be given along with Toxovax and should be given four weeks pre-tupping. However, the two vaccines must be given at different injection sites and must not be mixed together. No other vaccines should be given within 14 days of giving Toxovax or EAE vaccines. Always check meat withdrawal periods on the product data sheet.

Do not treat an animal using antibiotics at the same time as giving a live vaccine- as this can weaken or kill the live bacteria or parasites in the vaccine and make the vaccine ineffective.

Avoid giving the vaccines at a time of stress, such as weaning, as this can suppress the immune system and reduce the effectiveness of the immune response to the vaccine.

Most live vaccines will give protection for several years, and sometimes may last for a ewe's lifetime. This makes these types of vaccine very cost effective. However, it's important not to forget about vaccinating any replacements in the flock. Always check vaccine data sheets about specific timings, including the timing of boosters.

Planning ahead is also essential because Toxovax specifically should be ordered at least 7 days before you need it, as it has a short shelf life (7-10 days from manufacturing) and is, therefore, not typically held as stock by vet practices and must be ordered in.

Now is the time to look at your calendar- how far away is tupping? If it is only a few weeks away, don't leave discussing abortion vaccination with your vet until it's too late. Planning now could help prevent significant losses next spring.

DON'T LEAVE IT **TOO LATE** TO VACCINATE!

Plan now to protect
next spring's
lamb crop

AUGUST

We are here

M	T	W	T	F	S	S
					1	2
3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10	11	12	13	14	15	16
17	18	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27	28	29	30
31						

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER

TUPPING



Vaccinate at least
1 month before tugging

FEBRUARY/MARCH

LAMBING



Healthy ewes,
healthy lambs



1. REVIEW

Review your flock
health plan and
assess abortion risk



2. ORDER

Order vaccines
in good time –
don't leave it late!



3. VACCINATE

Vaccinate at least
1 month before
tugging



ABORTION VACCINES SHOULD BE GIVEN AT LEAST ONE MONTH BEFORE TUPPING