



Animal Health & Welfare NI

Sheep Scab **AWARENESS MONTH**

Spot it. Test it. Treat it. Stop it.

SPOT IT: Signs that sheep scab may be in your flock

This is the first in a series of articles that Animal Health and Welfare NI (AHWNI) will be running to raise more awareness of sheep scab in Northern Ireland. If you have any queries regarding sheep scab, contact info@animalhealthni.com for advice.

What is Sheep Scab?

Sheep scab is a highly contagious disease, caused by a mite (*Psoroptes ovis*) that lives on the surface of the sheep's skin. Once established on the sheep the mite population can double every six days, therefore sheep can become severely infected very quickly. This disease has a huge impact on both the welfare and productivity of sheep, and is of serious concern to the sheep industry as it is difficult to control its spread, due to the fact that sheep can be in the early stages of infection without showing clinical signs.

What Are The Symptoms?

The clinical signs that appear are actually caused by an allergic reaction to the faeces of the mites, rather than from them biting the sheep.

Early Stages:

- Sheep can initially appear normal following infection (but they will be infectious)
- Restlessness and rubbing
- Stained areas of wool or tags of fleece seen, some pale yellow liquid may be seen oozing from skin

Later Stages:

- Dry crusty yellow scabs in the fleece with a moist red outer ring, (in some cases mites may be visible at the edge of lesions)
- Increasing dampness of fleece, leading to:
Intense itching and scratching, rubbing against fences/posts, biting at flanks, scratching with hind legs
- Wool loss, particularly on shoulders, flank and back
- Loss of body condition; death due to failure to eat or secondary infections.

How Is It Spread?

The main source of infection is direct contact with other sheep. Risk factors include:

- Bought-in animals

- Animals returning from common grazing, shows etc.
- Neighbours (if fencing is not adequate to stop direct contact)

Another risk of infection is fences/equipment that have wool tags on them that contain mites- the mites can survive and be infective for up to 17 days off a sheep. Therefore, objects that may be risk factors include:

- Fence posts, wire, trees or bushes
- Handling facilities, feeding troughs
- Trailers
- Shared use of equipment eg at shearing or scanning
- Contaminated clothing/hands

Why Are We Talking About Sheep Scab Now?

With replacement ewe and ram sales increasing towards the end of summer and into autumn, this can be a particularly high-risk time for introducing sheep scab into your flock. Purchased animals may look clinically normal at sale, but this does not confirm that sheep scab is not present.

Sheep scab can occur at any time of year, but it is more commonly seen during the autumn and winter months and when sheep are housed. Shearing can make scab much less obvious during the summer, as removing the fleece disrupts the warm, humid environment that scab mites prefer and can reduce mite numbers. However, shearing will not get rid of an infestation completely (and can allow the spread of mites from farm to farm if correct hygiene procedures aren't followed). Small numbers of mites can remain on sheep without causing obvious signs.

As the fleece begins to grow back, conditions become more favourable for mite numbers to increase and signs such as itching, rubbing and wool loss may start to appear. This means that sheep which looked completely healthy during the summer could be carrying scab.

With more sheep moving between farms at this time of year, it is important to consider the risk of bringing sheep scab into your flock. However, even if you haven't recently purchased sheep, keep an eye out for clinical signs as conditions become more favourable for mite numbers to increase. Early identification and appropriate treatment can help reduce the welfare impact and production losses associated with sheep scab.

*Correctly diagnosing sheep scab will be discussed in next week's article- **TEST IT.***



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Sheep Scab

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Would you **SPOT** sheep scab?

Stage 1: No clinical symptoms present, but the sheep can still be in the early stages of infection.



Stage 2: Early signs: restlessness, rubbing, stained or tagged fleece



Stage 3: Later signs: intense itching, wool loss, crusty skin lesions, weight loss

