Animal Health & Welfare NI
Sheep Health

AHWNI Flock Health Focus: Beware of the Costs of Lameness on Fertility This Tipping Season

With tipping season already underway on most farms, it is likely that the routine management tasks to get sheep into the best condition for breeding have been completed. However, no matter how thorough the preparation beforehand, a ram or a few ewes may still become lame during the tipping period.

Although most preparation should be completed before the ram goes in, it is worth continuing to assess both ram and ewe condition throughout the breeding period. A small problem can quickly become more significant when sheep are covering ground and mating activity is high. Acting early may help prevent disruption to the breeding pattern and reduce the risk of a prolonged lambing period.

How Can Lameness Impact Tipping?

Even if it looks as though ewes are still being tipped, there are a few things to consider when either the ram or any ewes are lame.

Reduced Mating Activity

Lame rams may be less likely to actively seek out and mount ewes. They may still tip a ewe that is nearby, but if a ram has a lot of ground to cover to find ewes, he may not do so as efficiently. This can be particularly important where ewes have been synchronised or tipping has been tightened up, for example by introducing a teaser ram. In these circumstances, a lame ram may struggle to serve all the ewes that are in season at the same time.

Effect on Fertility

If an infection causing lameness makes a ram unwell, it can lead to a rise in his core or scrotal temperature. Systemic inflammation, pain or fever can reduce or temporarily halt sperm production. Sperm take approximately six to eight weeks to mature, so a significant illness during this period may affect a ram's fertility for several weeks.

Similar effects can be seen in ewes. Depending on the timing and severity of the lameness, ewes may spend less time grazing and lose body condition. Ewes in poor body condition are less likely to conceive successfully or maintain a pregnancy. Pain and the inflammatory response can also cause a rise in temperature or stress, which may disrupt the normal reproductive cycle and ovarian function.

Check Rams Before and During Tipping

A final check before turnout, followed by regular observation during tipping, can help identify problems early. The AHDB 'Five Ts' provide a useful reminder when assessing a ram: teeth, toes, tone (body condition), testicles and treatment needs. Pay particular attention to whether he is moving soundly, his feet are in good condition, he is maintaining body condition and he is showing normal interest in ewes. If there is any concern about his soundness or breeding ability, seek veterinary advice promptly.

Actions You Can Take Now

- Regularly check the flock for lameness throughout tipping and treat affected sheep as soon as possible, even if the problem appears mild. AHDB recommends treating sheep within three days of them becoming lame.
- During daily checks, watch sheep walking and look for uneven weight-bearing, shortened strides or reluctance to move. These can be early signs of lameness and should be investigated and treated appropriately.
- If a ram becomes lame during tipping, consider introducing another ram if possible. This can help keep tipping on track, particularly if the original ram is unable to work effectively.

- Where possible, identify a suitable replacement ram before the breeding season begins, rather than having to find one at short notice. If a ram is brought in from another flock, consider the disease risks and follow appropriate quarantine and biosecurity procedures. The replacement should be fit, healthy and ready to work; introducing an unsuitable or unprepared ram may create further problems.
- When you find a lame sheep, record its identity, the date and the treatment given, then check that it improves. Separate affected sheep where appropriate so they can be observed and treated without having to compete with the rest of the flock. If several sheep become lame over a short period, cases keep recurring or treatment does not work as expected, contact your vet to review the diagnosis and flock control measures.

Always Ensure You Are Treating the Right Cause

There are several causes of lameness in sheep, including infectious conditions and injuries. It is important to identify the cause rather than assume that it is a recurrence of a previous problem. Always avoid guessing what the problem is as the most appropriate treatment will vary depending on the cause.

The main causes of lameness include:

- CODD (contagious ovine digital dermatitis)
- Footrot
- Scald
- Toe granuloma
- Toe abscess
- Shelly hoof
- Bluetongue Virus (BTV)- it's important to remain vigilant in spotting symptoms of BTV, given the number of cases in England and Scotland this summer, with further cases now being found in the Republic of Ireland. Lameness can be a symptom of BTV, causing swelling at the coronary band (where the skin meets the hoof horn). If you believe symptoms may look similar to this, immediately contact your vet.

These conditions can require different treatments and, in some cases, different antibiotics. Correct diagnosis is important so that the right treatment is used. If you are unsure of the cause, consult your vet.

Continue to monitor the flock throughout tipping rather than relying only on the checks carried out beforehand. Identifying lameness early, addressing the underlying cause and keeping the ram team fit can help protect sheep welfare and keep the breeding season on track.

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Don’t Get Caught Out By Lameness At Tipping!

Early action helps protect flock welfare and keep your breeding season on track.



- Check for early signs of lameness daily
- Treat early- even if symptoms are mild
- Identify the correct cause