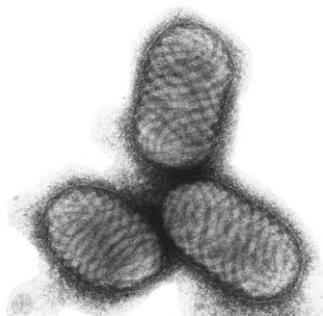


Introduction

Orf is a painful skin disease of sheep and goats and is common throughout the UK. It can strike at any time of the year and affect sheep of any age, but is most commonly seen just after lambing. Animals with orf develop scabby lesions around the mouth and nostrils, although the infection may also affect other parts of the body, for example the inside of the mouth, the lower legs and, in particular, the teats of nursing ewes.



The Disease



The disease is caused by a virus which only grows in the surface layers of the skin, but the virus will only cause an infection if the skin is already damaged. Therefore any cut, scratch or graze, no matter how seemingly insignificant, may predispose an animal to infection. Even rough food or pasture with nettles and thistles can increase the chances of becoming infected. Once in the skin, the virus multiplies and causes painful scabby lesions at the site of infection.

Normally, orf would be expected to last between four to six weeks and heal spontaneously without much need for intervention. However, occasionally lesions can become extensive or secondary infected with bacteria and result in serious disease and sometimes death.

Suckling lambs infected with orf run the risk of transmitting the virus to the ewe's udder which can lead to mastitis and potentially the loss of the affected half. Lambs with orf lesions may be disinclined to suck and, equally, ewes with sore teats may not let their lambs feed. Together this can result in undernourished lambs and/or the virus being spread to other ewes as infected lambs try to feed from others.

Although infected animals (or those that have been vaccinated against orf) develop antibodies against the virus, these antibodies do not provide good protection and explains why animals which have recovered from an orf infection, or even those vaccinated against orf, can become re-infected by the virus at a later date.

Treatment of Orf

There is no treatment for orf and as the disease is caused by a virus, it cannot be treated using antibiotics. Most orf infections clear up on their own within a few weeks, but the use of topical antibiotic paints, powders or aerosols can help prevent the establishment of secondary bacterial infections.

Lambs with severe lesions, or where their ewe does not let them suck, may have to be fed artificially to minimize weight loss. Ewes which are affected on the teats or udder should receive special attention to ensure that they do not develop mastitis.

Since the scabs that form during an orf infection are full of virus the biggest source of infection from one lambing season to the next is from the scabs that are shed from infected animals as they heal. Although the virus in the scabs will not survive a winter outside in damp conditions it can persist in dry buildings for many years. Cleaning and disinfecting buildings, particularly if they are used for lambing, is therefore important in the control of orf. The virus is susceptible to 3% iodophor (FAM) solution or 1% formaldehyde and most disinfectants as directed by the manufacturer. Steam cleaning may also be effective.

Protecting your flock from orf

Although complete protection against the disease is not possible at this time, vaccinating your animals against orf will help protect your flock and reduce the severity of the natural disease. There is only one vaccine available in the UK; Scabivax Forte, produced by Intervet/Schering Plough Animal Health. Immunity develops within 4-8 weeks of vaccination and is protective for about 12 months. This vaccine is a 'scratch' vaccine and ewes should be vaccinated in the axilla (between the top of the foreleg and the chest wall) using the vaccine applicator. Lambs can also be vaccinated in this way.

The vaccine contains live virus, and therefore **SHOULD NEVER** be used on farms which have never before had a problem with orf. If vaccinating pregnant ewes, do so no less than seven weeks before lambing and keep them away from the lambing area while the scabs caused by the scratch vaccine are being shed.

Protecting yourself from orf

Orf is a disease that can also affect humans, again infecting the skin and causing localised swollen, red areas which can be extremely painful. Those working with infected animals should wear protective gloves and follow good hygienic practices at all times. Particular care should be taken when handling the vaccine so as not to self-inoculate or get the vaccine in cuts or abrasions.



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