

Small Ruminant Newsletter



WINTER 2019

With lambing season fast approaching, this is a good time to address pregnancy toxemia, otherwise known as twin lamb disease, or lambing sickness. It is important to note that this is not a sheep-specific disease; does can also suffer from pregnancy toxemia, although to a lesser extent than ewes do. As with many diseases, it is extremely important to identify and treat pregnancy toxemia as soon as clinical signs are seen in the ewe or doe. Unfortunately, there are too many cases where veterinarians are called out too late to see a pregnancy toxemia case which results in loss of both mother and offspring.

What is pregnancy toxemia?

This disease is almost exclusively seen in the third trimester, typically within 1-3 weeks of expected lambing/kidding. More often than not, the ewe/doe is carrying at least twins (hence the name “twin lamb disease”) or more; however, ewes/does in poor body condition due to poor nutrition or other disease states can also be affected, even if they are only carrying a single. There is also some evidence that obese ewes/does are more likely to suffer from pregnancy toxemia but this is seen to a much lesser extent than in skinny ewes/does.



Pregnancy toxemia is a combination of low energy (ketosis or acetonemia) and low calcium. In the final several weeks of pregnancy, the lamb(s)/kid(s) are growing so rapidly that the dam can end up in a negative energy balance as she physically cannot consume enough to support the growth of her offspring. The ewes'/does' bodies will preferentially send energy to her growing offspring and expanding udder, leading to her compromised energy and calcium state.



What will I see in affected females?

Signs of pregnancy toxemia can be quite subtle at first and only detected by a keen observer. Initially, ewes/does may be slow in general (especially slow when eating) and may lay down more than the rest of the flock/herd. Left untreated, this progresses to going completely off-feed and being unable to rise to her feet; if she can get up and walk, her gait is uncoordinated. Severe cases can show more pronounced neurological signs such as tremors, star-gazing, blindness, and lying flat out on her side. If not treated at all, these animals go into a coma and subsequently die along with their unborn offspring.

How do I treat pregnancy toxemia?

The most important part of treatment of an affected animal is to be immediate and aggressive. The sooner these females are treated, the better their prognosis and the survival of their offspring is. It is important to drench mildly affected ewes with glycol or ketamalt (sugary oral substances) at appropriate dosages and intervals. If this treatment is implemented immediately after the first subtle signs of pregnancy toxemia are seen, you typically do not need to give the ewe any further treatment and the pregnancy usually carries on as normal. Glycol or ketamalt are also part of the treatment for severe cases, but additional treatments will be necessary, including intravenous dextrose, subcutaneous calcium, and an injectable multivitamin. Most severe cases ended up being treated by the veterinarian. Another important aspect of treatment is to get the fetuses out of the ewe/doe as quickly as possible. If the ewe/doe is well enough and close enough to her due date, she can be induced to give birth; if not, a caesarean section is recommended. It is important to get the lamb(s)/kid(s) out of the sick dam as quickly as possible as they are often the reason she is suffering from pregnancy toxemia.



Can I prevent pregnancy toxemia?

Good and appropriate nutrition is the most important factor in preventing pregnancy toxemia. This can include adding concentrate/grains to the diet and using better quality hay. Another way to provide appropriate nutrition is to have the ewes/does pregnancy checked and provide increased nutrition to those carrying multiples by feeding groups separately. It is also important to decrease stress in the ewes/dams as much as possible, which can include appropriate treatment for parasites as well.

If you have any further questions or concerns about pregnancy toxemia please feel free to contact us at the office.



Central Ontario

VETERINARY SERVICES