



# SHEEP SHEET

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Watery mouth disease is a common term used to describe an accumulation of clinical signs in neonatal lambs which includes lethargy, unwillingness to search for the teat and suck, profuse salivation, increasing abdominal distension and retained meconium (first feces of newborn).

The condition is caused by colonization of the small intestine by *E. coli* with rapid multiplication and release of toxin.

Initial contamination of the lambs' gut results from a high environmental bacterial challenge from dirty wet conditions in the lambing shed and pens, and ewes with fecal staining of the wool of the tail and surrounding the perineum. Colonization of the gut and rapid bacterial proliferation is facilitated by inadequate and/or delayed colostrum ingestion especially in small weakly triplets, and poorly fed ewes in low body condition with insufficient colostrum accumulation.

Watery mouth disease is commonly encountered in twins but especially triplet lambs aged 12 to 36 hours kept in unhygienic conditions. Affected lambs are dull, lethargic, depressed and reluctant to suck. They frequently lie in the corner of the pen and show little interest in sucking when encouraged to stand. They rarely stretch themselves when they stand. Within 2 to 6 hours there is profuse salivation, a wet lower jaw and increasing abdominal distension although the lamb has not been sucking. The condition can quickly progress to coma and death.

## Clinical signs of watery mouth disease

- **Twins but especially triplet lambs aged 12 to 36 hours**
- **Dull, lethargic, depressed and reluctant to suck**
- **Profuse salivation**
- **A wet lower jaw**
- **Increasing abdominal distension although the lamb has not been sucking**

## Watery Mouth Disease

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### Sheepdex: H-17

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**Lambs with watery mouth, initially are lethargic, showing depression, and reluctant to suckle. Lambs going to a coma and death can occur rapidly too.**

## Treatment

Despite abomasal distension in lambs with watery mouth disease, oral electrolyte therapy at a rate of 50mls/kg four times daily is essential to prevent dehydration. During the early stages soapy water enemas, such as diluted washing-up liquid, are commonly used. Mild laxatives/purgatives also promote gut activity and expulsion of meconium. Oral antibiotics may be effective during the early phase of the disease; however, veterinary advice should always be sought to ensure appropriate treatment is administered.

## Treatments

- **Soapy water enemas**
- **Mild laxatives/purgatives**
- **Oral electrolyte therapy at a rate of 50 mls/kg four times daily**
- **Discuss antibiotic treatment with a large animal veterinarian**

## Management/Prevention/Control Measures

Problems with watery mouth disease are almost invariably encountered in housed flocks towards the end of the lambing period caused by a build up of infection. All attempts must be made to improve hygiene standards in the lambing shed. Wherever possible, the remaining pregnant ewes should be moved to another building, or weather permitting, turned out to pasture. It is important to ensure lambs receive enough good quality colostrum to ensure adequate passive antibody transfer.

**Control Measures must include:**

- **Correct nutrition of pregnant ewes (to ensure good quality colostrum)**
- **Abundant clean, dry straw bedding**
- **Use of paraformaldehyde powder on straw bedding.**
- **Cleaning and disinfection of individual pens between lambing ewes.**
- **Collection and disposal of placentae.**
- **Ensure that lambs suck colostrum within two hours of birth**
- **Consider stomach tubing lambs with 50ml/kg colostrum replacement**
- **A 5kg lambs needs 1 litre of colostrum in the first 24 hours of life**

Antibiotic administration to prevent watery mouth disease in lambs must be carefully considered and is not routinely recommended. This is due to the potential risks of selecting for resistant bacteria which may transfer to humans. Discuss all use of antibiotics with your vet.



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*For more information write to Dr. Lyle G. McNeal, Founder; The Navajo Sheep Project; Serving People, Preserving Cultures, Inc., PO Box 4454, Logan, UT 84323-4454. The Navajo Sheep Project is an IRS registered IRS 501 ( c ) 3; non-profit organization.*