

# Ask A Vet: Healthy Start to a 4-H Lamb Project

*Sunday, April 19, 2015*

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

This is my first year in 4-H and will be getting my lambs for my project this weekend. Someone told me that I should treat my new lambs with a coccidiostat. What is this and why is this important?

-Newbie 4-Her

Dear Newbie,

Congratulations on deciding on such a fun and rewarding project. My daughter was in lamb club for ten years and loved every bit of it. Okay maybe not every bit: teaching the thing to brace every night til 10 or 11:00 or walking them 2 miles twice a day etc. but still it was a very successful project for her.

Most lambs are born December through April in this part of the country and 4-H lambs that are going to be competitive need to be born by January or February for fairs in July or August. That being said, lambs at greatest risk are those 1-6 months of age and may be found where there is intense grazing, crowding, shipping, changes in rations, severe weather changes (especially cold wet weather) and environmental contamination from older lambs or ewes. Coccidiosis is a very infectious and transmissible disease caused by protozoa. Most common species in sheep is Eimeria. (*E. ahsata*, *E. crandalis*, *E. ovinodalis* and to a lesser degree *E. ovinoidali*). Eimeria species in lambs and goats are thought to be host specific and won't transmit between each other. *E. crandalis* infects the ileum and *E. ovinodalis* infects the ileum, colon and cecum interfering with adsorption of fluid and nutrients causing diarrhea. However, *E. ovinodalis* damages the gut's ability to regenerate causing a more prolonged disease. This parasitic disease attaches to the epithelial lining of the intestine causing a cascade of symptoms. The most common signs are diarrhea with or without blood and mucus, dehydration, fever, weight loss, anemia, poor appetite, breaks in wool and sometimes death. Some may develop pneumonia as a result of a compromised immune system. Since oocysts of coccidia can be found in the feces of all ages of sheep, diagnosis cannot be made on finding oocysts only. Samples of 10,000 oocysts per gram can be found in healthy lambs at 8-12 weeks of age. Levels over 20,000 oocysts per gram with diarrhea or soft stools is however very characteristic. The thing to remember since oocysts may be present in healthy animals, the numbers can jump tremendously when that lamb is stressed at weaning or shipping to a sale or new farm. This is why it becomes very important to prevent the problem by treating that new lamb you bring home with an appropriate coccidiostat (a drug that kills the coccidia) through drenching the animal with an oral medicine or feeding a starter feed with it in it for the first 28 days. Prevention through good management is the key to controlling the disease and generates a better economic outcome at the 4-H auction with the production of a safe wholesome product to the consumer. As always contact your veterinarian for your best treatment and prevention plan.

-Dr. Wanda Schmeltz