

Ask A Vet: Sore Mouth In Young Lambs and Goats

Sunday, April 10, 2016

Dear Dr. Weldy's,

My son's 4H lamb has recently developed crusty sores around his mouth. They look so gross! What are they and what should we do about it?

Dear Reader,

It sounds like your son's lamb might have a case of soremouth, or contagious ecthyma. Soremouth is an infectious disease of mostly young lambs and goats and is caused by a parapoxvirus. Infection is caused by direct contact and people can be infected as well. Lesions may also be found on the feet and at the coronet band, and on the udder of ewes. The disease usually lasts 1-4 weeks and during that time the scabs will fall off and the tissue underneath will heal without leaving a scar. If lambs are very severely affected during the active portion of the disease, they may not eat well and could lose some condition. If the lesions are on their feet also, they may have variable degrees of lameness. Ewes with lesions on their teats/udder may also develop mastitis.

Treatment is not always necessary as the disease is self-limiting and will run its course. However, it is common for secondary bacterial infections to develop and antibiotics (injectable &/or topical) may be appropriate in these cases. If it is fly season, it is beneficial to apply insecticides to the area to prevent myiasis (infection with fly larva). Producers and veterinarians should use caution when treating cases of soremouth so the virus is not passed to them. Disposable gloves should be used. When humans contract the virus it is called orf. It causes similar lesions as in sheep on the person's hands or fingers that are painful.

There is a vaccine available for soremouth, but it should only be used in certain situations. The vaccine is a live vaccine that is appropriate for use in herds that are already exposed to the virus. One should not use the vaccine in a naïve herd. The vaccine is usually applied to a hairless area that is scratched before the vaccine is applied. The vaccine will cause the lesions in the area that it is applied. Gloves should also be worn when applying or handling the vaccine. Lambs should be vaccinated at 1 month old and then a booster vaccine can be given 1-2 months before entering a feedlot that is infected with the virus. Sheep that recover from natural infection will likely not get reinfected.

Contact your local small ruminant veterinarian for a definitive diagnosis for your son's lamb and if you have any other questions.

-Dr. Ashley Vander Wey