Flock Health Planning
Joint ill

Joint-ill is a common cause of lameness in young lambs. One or more joints can be infected and swollen. Infected fluid or even pus builds up in the joint which can cause permanent damage if not treated early with an effective antibiotic.

Joint ill is usually the result of a bacterial infection from a contaminated environment entering via the navel. The infection is usually caused by strains of streptococci. Other common environmental bacteria, such as coliforms, Fusobacterium necrophorum and Arcanobacterium pyogenes may be isolated. Some of the bacteria that cause mastitis in ewes (especially Streptococcus dysgalactiae) can also be an important cause of joint ill in early-lambing lowland flocks. Infection may be picked up from the ewe's teats or milk and large numbers of lambs may be affected, despite good hygiene and colostrum management. In many flocks the disease happens again in the following years.

Joint ill is most often associated with poor hygiene in lambing pens or where lambing outside in muddy conditions, although problems can occur where hygiene appears to be good. Good early intakes of colostrum are important. If lambs do not get enough colostrum in the first 12 hours after birth they will not have sufficient antibodies to protect them from common infections present in the environment.

Affected lambs are often lame in several joints, usually limb joints, including fetlocks, knees, hocks and stifles. Affected joints are hot and painful. If more than one joint is affected the lamb may spend a lot of time lying or even be unable to stand. It can be hard to find the affected joints in the early stages until the joint swelling becomes obvious. Feel and compare the same joints in both legs of lambs where you suspect joint ill. Some lambs may also have swollen, infected navels and/or liver abscesses while others may have symptoms of pneumonia or meningitis.

Treatment and Prevention

It is important to treat cases early to reduce the risk of permanent damage. Antibiotic injections should be given on the advice of your vet –the best antibiotic to use is one selected on the basis of laboratory tests. The most badly affected lambs may not recover and should be humanely killed.

The key factors in prevention of joint ill are:

- Lambing in a clean environment with plenty of fresh bedding and clean, dry pens

- Regular cleaning and disinfection and/or liming of pens between lambings

- Adequate disinfection of navels with strong iodine (10%) applied to the whole of the navel cord to dry it up. Iodine dairy teat dips are not suitable. Check navels 24 hours later and if not dry, apply some more iodine

- Make sure lambs get enough colostrum early enough. Ewe colostrum is best - at least 250ml but preferably more is desirable

Your vet can advise you about the diagnosis and management of joint ill in your flock.

Managing the risk of joint ill

Lowest risk

1. Good hygiene in lambing area, adequate disinfection of navels and good colostrum intakes
2. Adequate colostrum intakes but poor hygiene in lambing area
3. Poor hygiene in lambing area and poor colostrum intakes

Highest risk

Flock health planning – joint ill decisions

Is there a problem?   Date: _____

Condition	Cases – this year	Losses – this year	Target for next year
Joint ill			

Causes of joint ill diagnosed last year -	

Is any action planned?   Yes/No

Planned action	Target groups	Dates	Product
Check ewes for mastitis at weaning or before tupping	Ewes and flock replacements		
Colostrum for lambs	Lambs at risk of not getting colostrum		Stored frozen colostrum
Navel disinfection	Lambs		

Other decisions

Action to make sure good colostrum intake in lambs?   Yes/No

Clean lambing environment with plenty of fresh bedding, dry pens and regular cleaning   Yes/No

Hygiene in lambing area – cleaning and disinfection between ewes?   Yes/No

Turnout lambs as soon as possible after lambing?   Yes/No

No application of rubber rings for castration and tailing during the first day?   Yes/No

Flock health planning joint ill review date: _____