Coccidia Scours in Lambs / Kids

As many of you are well-into lambing or kidding season, and others are finishing up this season; we now have a large group of youngstock on our farms that we must start looking after. Although these troublemakers are a wonderful addition to your flock and add excitement to our days; they are also a source of new work and possible headaches. Now is a great time to plan for the upcoming months and strive for success with these new animals.

Unfortunately, these tiny creatures are quite sensitive, and we need to keep an eye out for illnesses that tend to show up, like pneumonia and scours. The parasite, coccidia, can cause quite severe scours in our flock, whether indoor or outdoor raised. Coccidia can be a tricky and devastating parasite that is common in our small ruminants. I hope that this newsletter will help provide some information on this parasite, how we can watch out for it, treat accordingly, and prevent/limit it's impacts on our farm.

What is coccidia?

Coccidia is a microscopic parasite that is easily found in the environment. It is a very hardy parasite that can live on various surfaces, including bedding, concrete, soil, etc. It can survive on these surfaces for long periods, even if animals have not been housed in these areas for the last few seasons.

Adult sheep and goats are also sources of coccidia, as they develop immunity preventing clinical infection, but harbour high levels in their intestines. The eggs are passed in the manure at various levels and contaminate the environment. As we approach lambing/kidding, ewes and does tend to have a weaker immune system, and as a result, shed more of these eggs than normal.

How do my lambs/kids become infected?

This parasite enters the animal through the mouth (whether nibbling at the bedding, or exploring their environment), where it then travels to and enters the cells that line the intestine. An animal does not need to consume large amounts of this parasite to develop an infection. This is because after coccidia enters a cell, it undergoes replication where it develops a high number of eggs, after which the cell ruptures releasing these eggs into their feces which then contaminate the environment. And the cycle can continue from there.

What do I look for?

Animals that are most affected tend to be between 1 month to 6 months of age. Adult animals are very rarely impacted by coccidia as they develop immunity. Depending on the burden of coccidia in the animal, the clinical signs will vary. Some variations of what they look like are listed below:

- Animals may appear healthy (give you no cause of concern)
- Fecal staining on their back ends (with loose manure) with a good appetite
- Fecal staining on their back ends (with loose manure), tucked up abdomen, depression
    - Sometimes excessive straining (potentially leading to a prolapse of the rectum)
- Sudden death

Most commonly, we see fecal stained ends, loose manure with a range of appetites / tucked up abdomens and depression.

Are my animals at risk?

Risk factors for coccidia in your flock can vary depending on the set up of your farm. However, some factors are universal.

1. Adult animals
    - They have a population of coccidia living internally but are not impacted by it as they have immunity. Adults shed coccidia eggs into the environment, creating a risk for our young animals which lack immunity. During times of stress, (i.e. lambing/kidding), the number of eggs that are shed increases.
2. Environment:
    - Environments that are not well maintained (i.e. dirty bedding & over-stocked group pens), allow coccidia eggs to accumulate in large numbers. With this high burden in the environment, the curious lambs/kids are at a higher risk of developing an infection.
3. Cleanliness:
    - Even if we separate our lambs/kids soon after birth, they may still ingest eggs. The burden in them may be low enough that we do not see any illness, yet these animals continue to contaminate the environment. As groups come and go, without thoroughly cleaning the environment, the burden of coccidia grows, and increases the risk of infection.
4. Disease:
    - Kids/lambs with stressed immune systems are more susceptible to coccidia infections. If they have another common disease, like pneumonia, reduce feed intakes and stress their immune systems, increasing the likelihood of them being clinically affected by coccidia.

How can I reduce the risk?

1. Reduce the stressors and predisposing disease
    - Ensure that pens of animals are not overstocked
    - Reduce frequent movement of animals between groups
2. Environment
    - Clean the pens in between groups
    - Prevent animals from defecating in the feed / water (i.e. raised feeders)
    - Ensure clean bedding is provided
3. Feed additives
    - Some products (coccidiostats) can be added to the ratio in animals close to kidding/lambing; as well as creep feed for youngstock, can be used to reduce the risk of infection

Can we treat our animals?

Luckily, there are products that are available to help our animals that are experiencing coccidia infection. To ensure proper treatment protocols, talk with your veterinarian to develop a protocol for identifying and treating animals. Most importantly, work with your veterinarian and nutritionist to develop prevention strategies to reduce the need to treat our animals.

If you have any questions about coccidia or developing a prevention strategy, please call us and we are happy to help answer any questions you may have.