

TIPS ON KEEPING YOUR GOATS FREE FROM DISEASE PROBLEMS!

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I recently read an article in the farming press described the anguish faced by a sheep farmer who eventually culled around 4000 ewes due to an outbreak of Maedi Visna (MV) in his flock. He had been concerned for some time about poor lamb growth rates, wasting ewes and increasing ewe mortality that eventually prompted a full investigation that confirmed that this awful disease had taken hold in the flock.

This article got me thinking about how the awful experience of this sheep farmer could be used in a positive way by goat owners to ensure that they can avoid these problems.

MV and a group of similar diseases that include Caprine Arthritis Encephalitis (CAE), Johne's Disease and Caseous Lymphadenitis (CLA) are all described as insidious diseases. By using the term insidious we mean that it is a slowly developing disease that can enter a flock or herd "under the radar" and remain unnoticed until clinical cases begin to develop by which time it will already be established.

We also describe this group as "Iceberg" diseases, in which for every case that is displaying typical clinical signs of the condition (the "tip" of the iceberg), there are many others that are either early unrecognised clinical cases, sub-clinically infected or even healthy but carrier animals (the base of the iceberg). In practical terms, when clinical disease is first confirmed, the disease itself is likely to be well established in the herd, with an owner often completely unaware of its presence. Each of these conditions can "creep into a herd unnoticed" then become established by spreading within the herd – yet no clinical signs may be evident for months and even years, before the first signs of illness are seen.

It is so important to know the health status of goats in your herd, this can be achieved either by simply keeping a mental (or other more reliable) record of problems confirmed in your flock or by laboratory testing of e.g. blood and faeces samples – or a combination of the two. Knowing the health status of your own goats forms the foundations to ensuring that your herd remains fit and healthy, thereby reducing the risk of facing the anguish faced by the sheep farmer.

Biosecurity:

The key word to all this is "biosecurity" – a term used to describe *"the prevention of disease-causing organisms entering or leaving any place where they can pose a risk to farm animals, other animals, humans, or the safety and quality of a food product."* These organisms can be bacteria, viruses, parasites, or other infectious / contagious agents.

It is important at the outset to recognise that biosecurity is a two-way process. We tend to use the term to describe the measures needed on a farm or smallholding to prevent new infections from gaining access. The reason I discussed the importance

of knowing the health status of your own goats is that you may well already have a health problem in your herd to which your goats have developed an immunity and are tolerant of its presence. This health problem may present a risk to any incoming naive goat that has not encountered it previously – hence “two-way.”

Assessing the risks:

By far the most significant risk is a new addition to the herd, either a goat from another owner / premises / dealer / market (or sheep onto a mixed species unit as many infectious agents are shared between goats and sheep). Every goat unit should with the help of their own vet, have a clear protocol for introducing new goats to the herd. Such a protocol should include as a minimum:

1. A plan to place the incoming goat(s) into quarantine away from the home herd. This does not need to be an elaborate building with search lights and barbed wire around it – but merely some form of shelter (or in fine weather a paddock or part of a paddock with shelter) separated from your own goats by a gap of as near 10 metres as possible. Individual goats should never be placed in isolation alone and should always be placed within the sight and sound of other goats or run with a companion kept in quarantine with it. This quarantine period should be a minimum of 14 days and longer if possible.
2. Incoming goats should be checked over on arrival and on a regular basis while in quarantine, looking for any evidence of:
 - a. Lameness (footrot can be a particularly devastating problem in a naïve herd).
 - b. Lumps or swellings (these may indicate the presence of CLA).
 - c. Hair loss, rubbing could be a sign of ectoparasites such as lice.
 - d. Diarrhoea may be a sign of worms but remember that many healthy goats can carry a significant worm burden capable of contaminating your pasture – and a particular problem as an incoming goat can introduce anthelmintic resistant worms to your premises. It is advisable to give incoming goats a quarantine worming dose on arrival.
3. Discussing with your own vet any concerns you may have during your regular goat health checks. Also discuss with your vet about laboratory tests that can help reduce the risks. The most important one is a simple blood test to check for CAE - if your herd is currently free of CAE the introduction of one single CAE positive goat could have serious long-term implications for your herd. Goats can also be tested for CLA via the same blood sample. If your incoming goat has come from a known high-risk area for bovine TB, then your vet may also suggest undertaking a TB skin test.
4. Be aware of the national health schemes that are available (e.g., The Premium Sheep and Goat Health Scheme). Members of this scheme have achieved high health status for diseases such as CAE and Johne's disease. You may consider joining one of these schemes yourself or purchasing goats from accredited herds within the scheme.

Other risk factors to consider include:

- Sharing equipment or facilities. Borrowing a weigh crate or trailer from a neighbour (with either goats or sheep) will carry a risk, particularly if it is visibly contaminated with faeces, has foot trimmings on the floor (footrot risk), or is contaminated with the pus from a burst CLA abscess (CLA pus can survive in the environment for up to 3 months). If you have to borrow, make sure it is visibly clean, and disinfect before use. Borrowing drenching gun equipment, foot paring equipment may be necessary – but again – clean and disinfect before use.
- Wildlife can carry and introduce infections to susceptible goat herds. Examples include:
 - Badgers gaining access to feeding areas and water troughs in known TB areas. Information on TB control in small goat herds can be found on the Goat Veterinary Society website.
 - Rats, mice and wild birds contaminating feed and bedding stores – these can introduce bacterial infections such as salmonella and Yersinia. Rodent control is always important as is having secure feed bins.
- Cats are often incriminated in sudden outbreaks of abortion linked to Toxoplasma infection. If you have cats around your goats, then having them neutered is a sensible move to prevent unwanted breeding and producing litters of kittens in and around feed and bedding stores where toxoplasma proliferation and contamination can most readily arise.