

Scabby Mouth, also called orf, contagious ecthyma or contagious pustular dermatitis, is a viral disease (poxvirus) affecting sheep and goats.

How does Scabby Mouth infection occur?

Infection occurs by direct contact with the virus which is highly resistant and can survive in the environment for more than 1 year. It occurs most commonly in young lambs, but occasionally in older sheep. Grazing of coarse pastures or stubbles may predispose to infection with Scabby Mouth as oral abrasions increase the potential for the virus to gain entry.

What are the signs of Scabby Mouth?

Scabby Mouth commonly affects the lips, mouth and surrounding skin, but can also affect the face, feet and the udder of nursing ewes. The virus causes sores to form, which then encrust before scabbing over and then falling off. The underlying skin heals without scarring. This cycle takes approximately 4-5 weeks. Lambs lose condition as they are reluctant to eat and it is too painful for ewes to feed suckling lambs. Those with foot lesions will be lame. These sores may become infected by opportunistic bacteria, causing further infection.

How is the infection transmitted and maintained?

The primary mode of transmission is thought to be through contact with a virus that survives in scabs that have fallen off previously infected sheep. Some researchers have also suggested that individual sheep may be capable of being carriers of the virus.

Can humans be infected with Scabby Mouth?

This virus is transmissible to humans, causing skin lesions. It is therefore recommended that people handling infected sheep should wear appropriate protection.

How is Scabby Mouth managed?

There is no treatment for Scabby Mouth and the disease is generally left to run its course. However, significant losses in production through decreased growth rates occur during this time. In severe cases, additional supportive treatment, such as antibiotic therapy, may be required.

Management of this disease can be achieved by vaccinating with Scabigard.™

What are the recommended vaccination programs?

When starting a vaccination program on a property, it is advisable to vaccinate all sheep. It is recommended that all lambs be vaccinated every year. Lambs can be vaccinated as early as 1 week of age. Scabigard™ is safe to use in pregnant ewes, but it is recommended that vaccination should be completed at least 6-8 weeks prior to expected lambing so as not to place the lambs at risk of disease. All new sheep introduced to a property with Scabby Mouth should be vaccinated prior to being put on pasture. Vaccination should be completed at least 6-8 weeks prior to shearing so as not to place shearers at risk of the disease.

Scabigard™ is administered by "scratching" the vaccine with the applicator on to the bare skin inside the front leg, forming a line (approximately 5cm). This produces a mild, controlled form of Scabby Mouth at the site of vaccination. This will then stimulate the sheep's immune system, without interfering with feeding or walking. A small line of pustules forms, which then encrusts, scabs and falls off. A sample of vaccinated sheep should be checked for "takes" 10-14 days after vaccination.

Will my sheep be protected for life?

After vaccination, the scabs will fall off, and small amounts of virus will remain in the environment. While sheep may be exposed to small amounts of the virus to "boost" immunity, this is not a reliable method to provide ongoing protection against the disease. Sheep that have been previously infected with Scabby Mouth, through natural infection or vaccination, do not maintain lifelong immunity and are susceptible to reinfection. However this is generally of shorter duration and lower severity. The Scabigard™ vaccine has been shown to provide effective protection against re-infection for 12 months.

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