



Small Ruminant Ramblings

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Contagious Ecthyma (Sore Mouth)

What Is It?

Contagious ecthyma is a pox-like disease that causes an infectious, contagious skin inflammation that can affect your sheep herd. It is characterized by scab formation on the mouth, nostrils, eyes and other areas that don't have wool or hair, such as the udder and vulva. The disease is caused by a virus that is very resistant and remains infectious for more than 12 years in the dried scabs that fall off in the pasture or barn.

What does it look like?

Lesions often occur first on the gum line as small, raised, red areas that become blisters. These blisters eventually rupture and combine into large scabs. Lesions are most common on the mouth of lambs/kids and on the udders of ewes/does. Secondary bacterial infection is common. After one to four weeks, the scabs fall off, and the lesions heal with no scarring.

How is it spread?

The virus is spread by contact with dried scabs or by animals with active lesions. Lambs and kids with lesions on their mouths often transmit the disease to their mother's udder.

When does it occur and what does it do?

Contagious ecthyma usually occurs in young animals, but mature animals that have never been exposed to the disease may contract it. The disease often occurs as an outbreak in the late summer, fall and winter when animals are on pasture or around lambing/kidding in early spring. It also occurs in feedlots during the winter. It causes weight loss in young animals because the lesions on the mouths of lambs and kids make nursing painful. Ewes and does with lesions on their udders also may not allow their young to nurse due to pain and possibly secondary mastitis. Lameness can result from lesions on the feet.

How is it diagnosed?

The disease usually can be diagnosed by physical exam due to its characteristic lesions. Contagious ecthyma is a reportable disease in many states, so contacting a veterinarian is important if you think you have this disease in your animals.

How do I treat it?

Supportive feeding for the young is beneficial. Antibiotics to prevent/treat the secondary bacterial infections sometimes are beneficial, as well. Fly repellants may also be useful, if needed.

How do I control or prevent it?

If you buy replacement stock, make sure they have no lesions when you purchase them and quarantine them from your other animals for at least 30 days. If your flock is already infected, the disease becomes a management issue. A vaccination program may be beneficial but is not without some risks. Contact a veterinarian for advice on developing a control program that includes vaccination. Natural infection conveys very high immunity to the disease and it is unlikely an animal that has had the disease will contract it again.

Can I get it?

Humans can contract contagious ecthyma. It is a zoonotic disease – meaning it can be transmitted to humans through contact with infected animals. For people, the lesions usually are solitary and appear on the hands, arms or face. It causes red nodules that rupture, forming scabs shaped like doughnuts. The lesions heal in a few weeks without scarring. Proper hygiene after contact with infected animals is a must.

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