

NADIS Health Bulletin



Knowledge transfer to farmers

To test your knowledge and understanding of the control of this condition, try our instantly marked self assessments, by clicking here

Health Quiz

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Liver fluke in sheep

Liver fluke infestation (fasciolosis) has always been a problem in the wetter western areas of the UK. More recently, liver fluke has been reported increasingly in eastern areas of the country due to the introduction of infested sheep. Slaughterhouse liver condemnations indicate that fasciolosis is widespread and increasing in frequency.

The causal parasite

Fasciola hepatica infects the liver in both cattle and sheep. For part of its life cycle it inhabits the snail, *Limnea truncatula*. This important stage of the parasite life cycle necessitates wet and warm conditions (above 7 - 10°C). Liver fluke causes 3 types of disease, acute, subacute and chronic. Essentially, late spring early/summer infestation of snails result in the autumn fluke challenge to sheep with immediate acute disease, subacute disease over the following weeks, or chronic disease apparent three months later depending upon the level of challenge.

Clinical presentation

Acute fasciolosis

Affected sheep die suddenly from haemorrhage and liver damage (Fig 1), with the first evidence of a problem being sudden deaths in previously healthy sheep from August to October (Fig 2). Inspection of others in the group reveals lethargy and reduced grazing activity. Gathering may prove difficult because sheep are reluctant to run caused by pain. Sudden deaths may occur up to 10% causing grave financial loss.

Subacute fasciolosis

The major presenting clinical findings are rapid loss of body condition and poor fleece quality despite adequate flock nutrition. Typically, some sheep present with severe depression, inappetence, weakness, and may be unable to stand. Losses typically occur from December onwards but may be much earlier (October) with severe challenge.

Chronic fasciolosis

The major presenting clinical findings are very poor body condition score and poor fleece quality and in many sheep, bottle jaw (Fig 3). Affected sheep may die in an emaciated

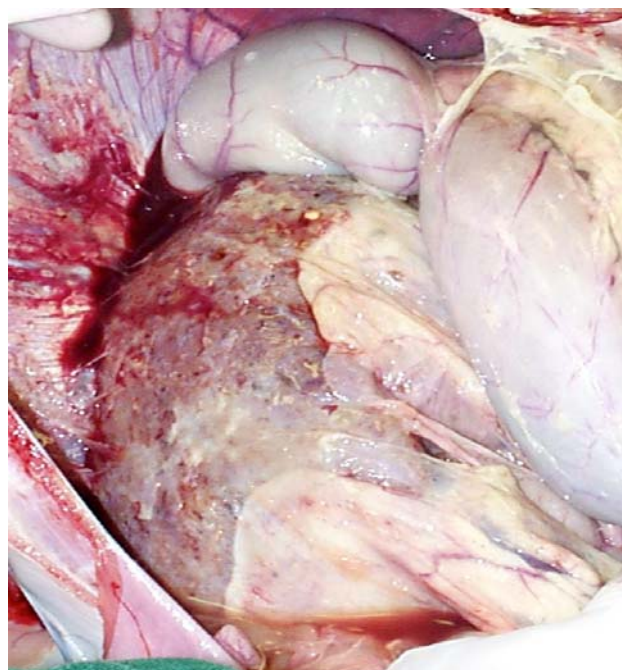


Fig 1: Affected sheep die suddenly from haemorrhage and severe liver damage



Fig 2: The first evidence of a problem of acute fluke may be sudden death in previously healthy sheep from August to October

state especially when infestation is compounded by the metabolic demands of advanced pregnancy/early lactation. Loss of the ewe and her lamb(s) can severely affect farm profits

Other diseases to consider:

Other causes of sudden death your vet will consider include:

- Clostridial disease; pulpy kidney, blackleg, Black disease, braxy in unvaccinated stock
- Tick diseases as habitats often similar for both snails and ticks:
- Pasteurellosis or other septicaemic diseases
- Louping ill
- Poor condition affecting many of your sheep may also result from:
 - Inadequate flock nutrition
 - Chronic parasitism including anthelmintic-resistant strains
 - Virulent footrot
 - Johne's disease
 - Poor dentition especially cheek teeth,
 - Chronic severe lameness.

Diagnosis

Acute/subacute fasciolosis

Diagnosis of acute/subacute fasciolosis is based upon the epidemiological data (high risk year such as 2007), and veterinary investigation of blood samples which reveals raised liver enzymes. Immature flukes are demonstrated in the bile ducts and gall bladder at necropsy.

Chronic fasciolosis

Chronic fasciolosis is diagnosed by demonstration of fluke eggs in faecal samples. Mature flukes are demonstrated in the bile ducts and gall bladder at necropsy (Fig 4).



Fig 3: The major clinical findings of chronic fluke infestation are very poor body condition score and poor fleece quality, and in many sheep, bottle jaw.



Fig 4: Mature flukes are demonstrated in the bile ducts and gall bladder at necropsy



Fig 5: Fencing off snail habitats is rarely practicable and in most situations is cost prohibitive as these are often extensive sheep enterprises.

Treatment

Triclabendazole is highly effective at killing all stages of flukes responsible for acute fasciolosis. Drenched sheep should be moved to clean pasture or re-treated every three weeks for the next three months at least.

Nitroxylnil and oxcyclosanide are less effective against immature flukes and should be used only in the treatment of subacute and chronic fasciolosis. Once again, treated sheep must be moved to clean pastures.

Improved nutrition is essential.

Management/Prevention/Control measures

Infestations are controlled by strategic drenching based upon advice written in the veterinary flock health plan. During low risk years triclabendazole is administered in advance of the predicted challenge during October and January, with another flukacide drug administered in May. In years when epidemiological data indicate a high risk of fasciolosis such as 2007, additional triclabendazole treatments are given in November and February. While it may be possible to eradicate fluke from a property, there are considerable risks from not drenching as the appearance of clinical disease in a few sheep represents serious losses in the whole flock. In certain areas wildlife hosts may play an important role in the disease dynamics.

Fencing off snail habitats (Fig 5) is rarely practicable and in most situations is cost prohibitive as these are often extensive sheep enterprises. Drainage is cost prohibitive

and many properties are subject to environmental controls.

The NADIS fluke risk forecast for 2007/8 (see [Parasite Forecast](#) www.nadis.org.uk for the latest update) reports **a very high risk of disease in northern Scotland, western Scotland and perhaps also north-western England and north Wales. In addition, disease is expected to be prevalent in eastern Scotland and south-western England/south Wales, with occasional disease in other regions.** Those snail habitats that have remained wet through the summer will be the high-risk grazing areas, and may well carry infective metacercariae through November. Even in the absence of acute fluke disease, smaller burdens of fluke acquired now may lead to subacute or chronic disease later in the year.

Economic importance

Fasciolosis can have a serious financial impact on a sheep farm with immediate losses of 5 to 10% caused by acute/subacute disease. Chronic disease could half profits by reducing lamb crop and increasing ewe mortality.

Infestations are controlled by strategic drenching based upon veterinary advice. The role of health planning by the farmer's veterinary surgeon is essential to maintain profitability and prevent losses.

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NADIS Health Bulletins are designed to improve farm income, animal health and welfare by promoting disease control and prevention.

Discuss how health planning can improve the profitability of your farm with your veterinary surgeon.

NADIS is supported by BPEX, EBLEX, HCC, QMS, Elanco Animal Health, Merial Animal Health and MLC.

