

Dear Dr. Wise,

Question: My neighbor thinks my show lambs have coccidia because they are not growing or eating very well. I just wormed them so how can they have coccidia? If they do have coccidia, do I need to worry about the barn cats getting it too?

Answer: Your neighbor may be on to something. The best way to find out is to take a fecal sample to your veterinarian and have him or her look at it under the microscope to see if your lamb is shedding any coccidia in its stool, as well as other common parasites.

Coccidia is a protozoal organism that lives on sheep. It is not a "worm", therefore worming with standard medications will not treat this microscopic protozoal organism. As the animal ages, it should develop an immunity to the protozoa. Lambs are usually infected by nursing udders that have fecal contamination, or by nosing around their pens and eating or drinking from feeders that have been contaminated with sheep manure. The coccidia causes damage to the intestinal lining of the sheep which can produce a variety of clinical signs.

Clinical disease usually becomes evident after a period of stress such as weaning, being hauled, or shown. Diarrhea is the primary clinical sign and can vary from severe and watery to bloody to mucoid or it may not be present at all. Other clinical signs that may be present include poor appetite, low rate of gain, poor quality wool coat, and pale mucous membranes. If the infection is severe, then the animal's growth may be stunted.

Treatment involves oral medications in the form of pills, liquids or additives to drinking water. Veterinarians can provide appropriate treatment based on the size of the lambs, the size of your herd and the severity of the problem. Once animals have been diagnosed and treated, your veterinarian can develop a long term prevention plan with products that can be added to feeds to help prevent further infections. Another way of preventing reinfection is by cleaning the pen daily to decrease the concentration of coccidia in their environment.

The good news is that coccidia is species-specific. This means you do not have to worry about your cats contracting coccidia from your sheep.

If you have a question, write Dr. Wise, Indiana Veterinary Medical Association, 201 S. Capitol Avenue, Suite 405, Indianapolis, IN, 46225 or www.invma.org.