

A Guide to Iceberg Diseases in Sheep



Iceberg diseases are hidden threats in sheep flocks, with subclinical infections often outnumbering visible cases. Awareness, regular screening biosecurity and veterinary guidance are key to minimising their impact on flock health and productivity.

The Five Main Iceberg Diseases

1

BORDER DISEASE (BD)

- A viral disease transmitted via milk, colostrum, faeces and respiratory secretions.
- Causes hairy coats, neurological issues and weak lambs.
- Persistently infected lambs act as a constant source of infection.
- Treatment – No vaccine or cure currently available.

2

CASEOUS LYMPHADENITIS (CLA)

- Bacterial infection causing abscesses in lymph nodes and internal organs.
- Spread through direct contact or contaminated environments.
- Leads to chronic ill thrift and reduced productivity.
- Treatment – Commercial vaccines can reduce the incidence of CLA in a flock but do not prevent all new infections or cure infected sheep.

3

MAEDI VISNA (MV)

- A viral disease affecting the lungs and nervous system, also causing mastitis.
- Reduces conception rates, milk yield and growth rates and increases lamb mortality.
- Highly contagious and fatal, often spreading via close contact during housing.
- Treatment – No vaccine or cure currently available.

4

OVINE JOHNE'S DISEASE (OJD)

- Caused by *Mycobacterium avium* subspecies paratuberculosis (MAP).
- Transmitted mainly via the faecal-oral route in young lambs.
- Symptoms include chronic wasting, poor fleece and bottle jaw.
- Difficult to detect early as antibody tests are only reliable in later stages.
- Treatment – Commercial vaccines can reduce the incidence of OJD in a flock but do not cure infected sheep.

5

OVINE PULMONARY ADENOCARCINOMA (OPA)

- Also known as Jaagsiekte, caused by a retrovirus.
- Leads to lung tumours and fluid accumulation causing respiratory distress.
- Treatment – No vaccine or cure currently available.
- Postmortem examination is required to diagnose the disease.



DETECTION AND MANAGEMENT

Screening is essential, including blood tests, faecal sampling and postmortem examinations.

Targeted testing of thin ewes can identify affected animals.

Vaccination is available for some diseases under veterinary guidance.

Implementing a Health Plan and biosecurity measures can reduce disease spread as can carefully sourcing of replacement stock and isolating new or infected animals.

Voluntary Schemes like the SRUC Premium Sheep and Goat Health Scheme support monitoring and control of the diseases.

TRANSMISSION AND IMPACT

Most iceberg diseases are highly contagious and can spread through direct contact, contaminated environments or infected milk and colostrum. Infected flocks often experience reduced productivity, chronic weight loss, poor fertility and increased mortality.

Because many animals are subclinical carriers, outbreaks may go unnoticed until significant losses occur.