Arthritis in Sheep

Arthritis is a progressive disease causing structural degeneration of the joints. In older animals it usually follows natural wear and tear on the joints. Younger animals may also develop arthritis but this is a very different disease process normally caused by specific diseases, such as following a navel infection or other bacterial disease. These cases are more acute and require veterinary attention and specific antibiotic treatment.

The degeneration causes inflammation of the joints and wearing of the protective cartilage. Early in the disease this presents as swollen, painful joints. In time joints will feel thickened and there may be reduced movement.

Who does it affect?

Primarily it is a disease of older animals; we do not commonly see arthritis in commercial flocks. Most arthritic sheep are over 10 years old. Other compounding factors include being overweight, which creates additional strain on the joints. Arthritic sheep may be found to be more lame in cold weather.

What are the signs to look out for?

Given the stoical nature of sheep, the first signs of the disease may be as subtle as a sheep spending more time lying down or moving around less. Lameness usually develops over time and starts off mild but can progress to severe lameness or unwillingness to put the foot to the ground. This may lead to gradual weight loss and susceptibility to other diseases such as pneumonia or fly strike. On examination, effected joints may appear thickened and stiff or painful to manipulate.

What treatments are available?

Overweight sheep should be encouraged to gradually loose weight through feeding a grass and forage only diet. Ensuring sheep have soft lying areas and adequate bedding is also important.

There are no licensed veterinary treatments for this disease. However in our experience aspirin is safe for use as an anti-inflammatory and painkiller in the treatment of arthritis in sheep. An initial dose can be calculated depending on the size of the sheep. This is then adjusted with the response seen, aiming to find the minimum dose necessary, to minimise side effects. Some animals respond well to a daily dose of oral Rheumocam.