

Controlling Sore Mouth in Meat Goats

NC STATE EXTENSION

Animal Science Facts

Introduction

Contagious ecthyma, commonly called **sore mouth**, is a contagious, viral disease of goats and sheep known by several alternative names, including **orf**, **scabby mouth** and **contagious pustular dermatitis**. Sore mouth is common in goats worldwide and can produce painful, thick scabby sores on the lips and gums. Goats infected with sore mouth usually heal completely without scars after one to four weeks. However, in severe cases secondary infections may extend that period. Feed intake may be depressed resulting in weight loss.

Sore mouth is not limited to the mouth. A kid with sore mouth lesions can pass the infection to the teats of a doe during suckling. Lesions appearing on udders are painful and the doe may not allow the kids to nurse and may develop mastitis. The disease may also be passed from infected animals to others. In addition, scabs which have contaminated the environment may be another source of infection. Milking equipment and bedding contaminated by infected does are other possible sources of infection. The lesions are crusty, and may be secondarily infected with bacteria such as staphylococci and others. Antibiotics are indicated if secondary infections are severe. Although the lips and gums are most commonly affected, lesions have been reported on the face, ears, coronary bands, scrotum, teats, vulva, neck, chest and flank.

The sore mouth virus is very hardy and persists for extended periods away from the host in the dried scabs from an infected animal. Recovery from the disease gives immunity for at least one year. Transfer of immunity from the doe to the kid through colostrum has not been conclusively proven. Very young kids that are severely affected may die.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis is usually based upon clinical appearance. Laboratory tests may be used for confirmation.

Treatment

In mild cases, treatment may not be necessary. Softening ointments may help in more severe cases. It is important to make sure that affected animals are eating and drinking. Soft, palatable feeds may help to keep intake up. Antibiotics may be required if secondary infections are severe. Dairy goats with sores on the udder should be milked last and an antiseptic udder salve applied to control bacterial proliferation until healing occurs.

Prevention

Commercial vaccines labeled for both goats and sheep are available and have been of value in some instances. These products should always be used according to product label direction and after consultation with a veterinarian or animal health expert. The vaccines are unattenuated live virus preparations (basically ground-up scabs) or tissue culture strains. Therefore, vaccinating a clean herd will introduce the disease to the herd, and should be done with full consideration of this fact. Scabs appearing at the vaccination site in 1 to 3 days indicate that the vaccine is “taking.” For goats that are shown regularly, vaccination prevents the occurrence of an outbreak during the show season. However, it is important to vaccinate animals at least six weeks before the show season, so that vaccine scabs will have disappeared before the first show. Following vaccination, at least two to three weeks are necessary for adequate immunity to take place. Animals are vaccinated in a hairless, protected area. Sites for vaccination include the inside of the ear, the underside of the tail, and others.

It may not be a concern to vaccinate pregnant animals because the vaccine reportedly does not induce abortion. However, the stress of herding pregnant animals into a handling facility and vaccinating them could potentially induce abortion in some animals.

Vaccinated does may give some colostral immunity to kids. However, colostral immunity is short lived, and vaccination should focus on vaccinating each new kid crop. In some programs, annual revaccination of late pregnant does is performed along with vaccination of the new kid crop. Disinfection of the pens after all lesions have cleared is recommended in case the owner of an infected herd chooses not to follow a routine vaccination program.

Human Health Concerns

The sore mouth virus may infect man. Persons handling affected animals or vaccinating goats or sheep should wear gloves at all times when handling these animals or the vaccine to protect against acquiring infection.

Summary

Sore mouth is a contagious, viral disease that produces thick, scabby sores on the lips and gums and may also be observed on udders or other areas. Sore mouth usually runs its course in one to four weeks except in cases of secondary infections. Treatment is of little value. Softening ointments and soft and palatable feed may help to keep feed intake up. Commercial vaccines labeled for goats and sheep are available. However, because the vaccine is a live virus product, vaccinating a clean herd will introduce the disease to the herd. Persons vaccinating goats or handling goats with sore mouth should wear gloves at all times.

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There is an alternate Spanish language version of this document here: [Controlando ectima contagioso en caprinos de carne](#)

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