



FACT SHEET

MAY 2020

EXAMINING EWES' UDDERS

Around 5% of ewes in New Zealand have problems with their udders (udder defects). These can lead to reduced lamb survival and growth rates. It's a good idea to check udders 4-6 weeks after weaning so that affected ewes can be identified and culled.

WHY CHECK EWES' UDDERS

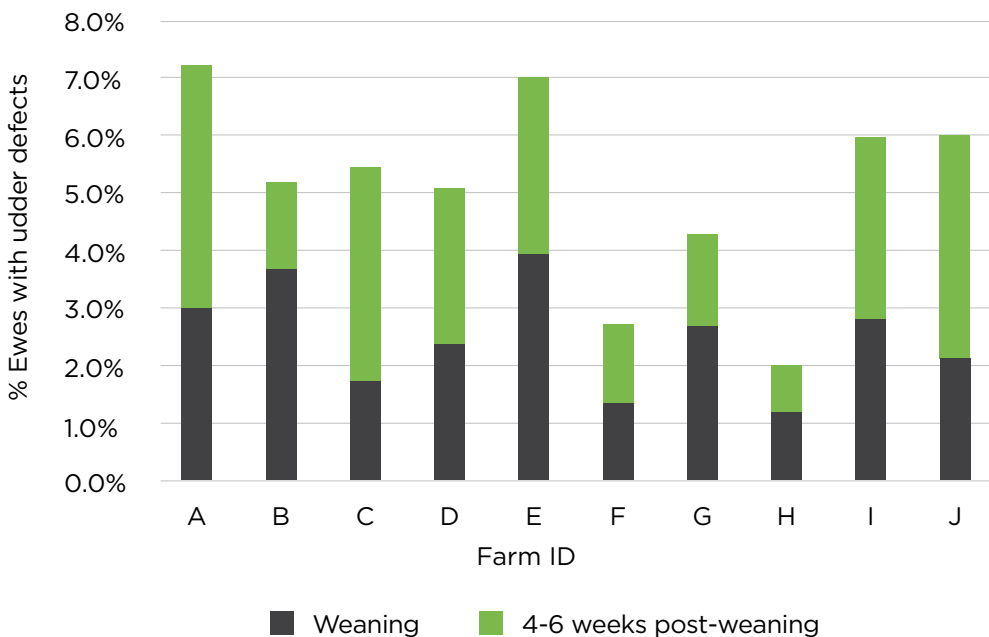
Studies on lower North Island farms have shown that 2-7% (average around 5%) of mixed-age ewes have udder defects. The lambs that are born to ewes with udder defects will have a reduced chance of survival - their death rate is 3-4 times higher compared with lambs whose dams had a normal udder. Lambs that do survive grow an average of 25g less per day so their average weaning weight is around 2kg

lighter than lambs whose dams had normal udders. Because of these effects, ewes with udder defects will wean around 11 less kg of lamb compared with ewes with normal udders.

WHEN AND HOW TO CHECK UDDERS

Many farmers check ewes' udders at weaning or shortly thereafter. However, many ewes with apparently normal udders at weaning are found to have udder defects 4-6 weeks later. This is probably due to post-weaning mastitis and possibly also because it is easier to feel some defects once the udder has dried-off. In research studies it has been found that checking ewe udders a few weeks prior to mating (rather than at weaning) is a better predictor of how udders will affect lamb survival and growth for the coming season. It is therefore recommended to check udders 4-6 weeks after weaning in order to find the maximum number of affected ewes but still have time to finalise ewe numbers before mating.

PERCENTAGE OF EWES WITH UDDER DEFECTS



The percentage of ewes with udder defects on 10 farms in the lower North Island. The percent of ewes found to have udder defects at weaning is in black, while the percent of ewes that developed new udder defects 4-6 weeks after weaning are in green.



Checking ewe udders while they are standing in the race

WHAT TO CHECK FOR AND WHAT TO DO

GENERALISED HARDNESS OF THE UDDER / MASTITIS

Generalised hardness of the udder would often be called mastitis. If the infection is recent the udder will be hot and swollen, but more commonly the infection has been there for some time and the udder half or halves will simply feel very hard all over. If the affected udder half is 'milked' by gently squeezing the teat, in recent infections the secretion might be watery, bloody or clotted. However if the udder has been infected for some time the secretion may be very thick and discoloured or there may be no secretion at all. Note that just after weaning the udder is often quite firm as it is full of milk, however an udder half with generalised hardness will be very firm/hard.

Ewes with generalised hardness / mastitis in one or both udder halves should be culled.



Checking udders: To check udders effectively they must be palpated (felt). Just looking at the udder, during crutching or shearing for example, isn't effective. It is easiest to palpate udders while the ewes are standing in the race by feeling and gently squeezing both halves of the udder. If it is being done 4-6 weeks after weaning, if possible also roll the teats between your fingers.



The udder half on the right is clearly larger than the other side and has generalised hardness / mastitis.



This udder looks normal but when it is palpated the udder half on the right feels very firm (has mastitis) while the other side feels normal.

Some farmers wish to treat ewes with generalised hardness / mastitis in one or both halves of the udder. If the infection is in the early stages (swollen, hot) then treatment may be possible - contact your veterinarian for advice. Ewes with gangrenous mastitis ("blue-bag") are usually also sick and should be humanely euthanased or treated immediately - contact your veterinarian for advice.

Typically, generalised hardness / mastitis is not found until after weaning and is usually a long-standing infection. Treatment is unlikely to be satisfactory and these ewes are usually best culled.

LUMPS

Lumps within the udder tissue can range from one to many and from small to large. They are usually only found in one half of the udder but can sometimes be found in both sides. As a general rule, ewes with lumps within the udder tissue should be culled as their lambs are more likely to die or have slower growth rates. Sometimes farmers ask if it is appropriate to keep ewes that only have one or two very small lumps in one half of the udder. There is currently inadequate data to know whether the number and size of lumps is important so the safest option is to cull. If you are short of ewes then keeping those with only one or two very small lumps might be alright provided the lumps are not near the teats.



This udder has two large lumps within the udder tissue.

It is normal for some ewes to have lumps just in front of, or just behind, the udder. These are attached to the udder but are not within the udder tissue. At weaning about 3% of ewes normally have these lumps and by 4-6 weeks after weaning on average about 1.5% of ewes have them - as they are normal these ewes do not need to be culled.



This ewe has a lump just in front of the udder which is attached to, but not within, the udder tissue. This is normal and this ewe does not need to be culled.

BURST ABSCESES

These can be felt or seen on the outside of the udder and are usually a result of infections within the udder tissue which have burst out. There is usually generalised hardness / mastitis or lumps in that udder half as well (in which case the ewe should definitely be culled), but not always. There is insufficient data on the effects of a small burst abscess with no other obvious udder defect, but the safest option would be to cull.



Burst abscess on an udder

TEAT DEFECTS

It is normal for ewes to have abrasions or scarring of their teats due to damage from the lamb's mouths and this is unlikely to cause any problems. However ewes with missing teats or very damaged teat ends should be culled. Ewes that have a thickened core down the centre of one or both teats (like a pencil lead) 4-6 weeks after weaning should be culled. From research studies it seems that the thickened core is not important if it is present at weaning and is only a problem if it is still there 4-6 weeks after weaning.

SUMMARY

Udder defects are relatively common in New Zealand ewes and lead to reduced lamb survival and growth. It is best to check ewes' udders 4-6 weeks after weaning to find and cull those with hardness, lumps and other defects.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

A video tutorial on ewe udder defects can be found at: www.beeflambnz.com/knowledge-hub/video/examining-ewes-udders-identify-possible-problems

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