

## **Rectal Prolapse in Lambs**

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Rectal prolapse is one of the most common problems seen in lambs at livestock shows. This problem is not only unsightly to exhibitors and the public, but also results in economic and death losses in lambs. Rectal prolapse can be treated and can be, at least partially, prevented. Changes in management practices should result in fewer problems with rectal prolapses in market lambs.

About five percent of all market lambs will have rectal prolapse, though in some groups, up to one lamb of five will be affected. Affected lambs often refuse to eat and lose weight. Commonly, these animals must be marketed early, and will sell at a discounted price.

A number of factors have been proven or suspected of resulting in more rectal prolapses:

1. Ewe lambs are affected more often than wethers.
2. Most prolapses occur in lambs after weaning but before the lambs are a year old. Black-faced lambs are much more commonly affected than white faced lambs.
3. Lambs being fed high energy diets and fatter lambs have a higher incidence of rectal prolapse than others.
4. Most prolapses occur in the summer when the weather is dry and dusty.
- \*5. Coughing is a very important factor linked to rectal prolapses.
6. Diarrhea due to coccidiosis or other causes is associated with rectal prolapse.
7. Molded feeds and growth promoting implants may cause relaxation of the rectal area and result in more rectal prolapses.
8. A tendency to rectal prolapse may be inherited, though this has not been proven.
- \*9. A recent trend in market lambs has been to dock tails as short as possible. Exhibitors feel that short docks give the lambs' rump a more desirable appearance. In a recent study in Minnesota, 576 black-faced cross lambs were divided into two groups. One-half (288) of the lambs had their tails docked  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch long, while the other half were docked at 3 inches. Eight percent of the short docked lambs suffered rectal prolapse, while none of the long docked lambs were affected. Since most Tennessee show lambs are docked shorter than  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch, it is likely that our problem is worse than seen in the Minnesota study. In response to this situation, the

state of California implemented changes to its show regulations that state *“to qualify to show as market lambs, animals must be docked so that tail can be lifted. Lambs that have been redocked or have complete tail removal will not be eligible”*. Other associations and shows are implementing similar rules.

### **Symptoms**

Rectal prolapse in lambs usually begins as a small round area sticking out, often when the lamb coughs or lays down. The prolapse will swell and tears in the rectum are commonly seen. Over time, the length of prolapsed rectum increases and the animals appetite is lost. Death may occur.

### **Treatment**

Prolapsed rectums are most successfully treated soon after they first occur. One of two methods are commonly used to treat rectal prolapse in lambs. Injection of irritating solutions around the rectum along with a purse string suture around the anus is most successful, if used with less severe cases of prolapse. Amputation of the prolapsed part of the rectum using special prolapse rings and elastrator bands is also a good way to repair prolapses. It is a good idea to reduce the feed intake of affected lambs for a day or two. The use of phosphate enemas to keep manure passing is important. Giving the lamb 2-4 ounces of mineral oil daily will also help keep the lamb's manure soft.

### **Prevention**

Rectal prolapses in lambs can be prevented. Preventing and treating coughs in lambs whether the cough is due to dry, dusty conditions, viruses or bacteria is helpful. Diarrhea can also be prevented. Having longer tail docks should result in fewer rectal prolapses.

### **Summary**

Rectal prolapses in lambs is a treatable and preventable condition. Proper veterinary care for coughs and diarrhea along with longer tail docks should result in a dramatic reduction in this condition in lambs.