

Abortions in Sheep and Goats: What to Do and How to Protect Yourself

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Breeding season is over for most and it's time to start preparing for lambing and kidding. Most producers prepare by gathering the needed supplies and getting areas of the barn ready for this exciting time of year. Lambing/kidding pens are constructed, medicines obtained, barns are cleaned out, and hopefully gloves are purchased. I say hopefully because some people tend to overlook the importance of personal protective equipment, or PPE for short, on livestock operations. Trust me when I say that you will want to wear gloves when assisting your sheep or goats with lambing/kidding after you read this article.

Late term abortions in sheep and goats are quite common, more so than in other livestock species. This is why sheep and goat producers must be vigilant in the detection of abortions, and in the control of such cases. There are many causes of abortion and several of these bacterial and viral agents can infect humans. Abortion rates for small

ruminants are usually in the neighborhood of 5%, with less than 5% being great, and more than 5% being cause for concern. An "abortion storm" is characterized by 20% or greater loss of the lamb or kid crop and can be quite devastating. Hopefully your rates never exceed 5%, but it is always best to be prepared for an increase. So as a producer if you have one to two abortions per year (under 5% of your flock or herd) there is not much cause for concern. If this number jumps above 5% then it's time to take action and find out what the cause is.

It is essential to work with your veterinarian to diagnose and treat causes of abortion. Early abortions may or may not be seen by the producer, so those often go undetected. You may never see anything except a return to estrus, or you might see bloody vaginal discharge. Late term abortions are most commonly detected because we can see the fetus once it is delivered (usually the final two months of gestation). It is important to have your veterinarian perform a necropsy on aborted fetuses and their associated tissues (placenta). There are also laboratories and veterinary schools that can perform necropsies also. This is a great way to determine what caused the abortion and to help develop the next steps to treat other females who may be affected. Results are not always set in stone, but it is definitely worth the effort

The Kentucky Sheep and Goat Check-Off Program began

in 2010 and collects \$.50 for every \$100 worth of sheep and goats sold in the Commonwealth. According to Kentucky law, Check-Off funds must be used for the purpose of promoting the increased use and sale of sheep and goats.

TO DATE, CHECK-OFF HAS PROVIDED:

- **\$50,000 in New Farmer Recruitment loans** have been given to 25 new/beginning producers in Kentucky since 2012
- **\$50,000** given for special projects to help producers increase marketing efforts throughout the state since 2012
- **\$10,000** spent in promotion of sheep & goat products in 2018

KY Sheep & Goat Check-Off Sponsors the Try Something Different Tonight marketing campaign

of people who tasted lamb and goat products: **26,000**
of people who have learned about products and cooking techniques: **5 million**

To learn more about the Kentucky Sheep and Goat Check-off Program visit

www.kysheepandgoat.org/Check_Off.html



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to figure out what happened. If your veterinarian cannot perform the necropsy immediately it is best to put the fetus and any associated tissues in a trash bag and put it on ice. Never freeze these specimens and do not leave them outside (even in cold weather). Tissues like this can decompose quickly and this will make it harder to determine what bacteria or other agents might have been present in the uterus. So please do not take a carcass, or tissues for necropsy that have been sitting at the barn for several days. Your veterinarian will not be happy with decomposing tissues! Once your veterinarian determines the cause of abortion, or lack of cause, he/she can help you with the next steps to prevent further incidence of disease.

When handling aborted fetal tissues and the fetus itself you must be very careful and aware of the risk for zoonotic disease transmission. Wear appropriate PPE such as palpation sleeves, gloves (nitrile or latex), clothes such as coveralls you can easily remove and wash, and rubber boots. Eye protection and face masks are also good additions to help keep you safe. You may be exposed to various bacterial agents and viruses during your work at the barn, but in a concentrated area (placental tissues/aborted fetus) these same bacteria and viruses can become especially dangerous. Pregnant women and immunocompromised individuals (cancer patients, those on medication that suppresses the immune system, etc.) should never handle aborted fetuses or tissues. Children really shouldn't handle them either to keep them safe. Abortive agents in sheep and goats can cause abortion in humans as well so it is best to never expose pregnant women to these dangers. These individuals should also never handle

soiled towels, clothes, boots, etc. that could be contaminated.

If you do suspect that you have a female that is aborting or has aborted it is best to isolate her from the rest of the herd or flock. Any tissue or fetuses that are found should be submitted for necropsy as quickly as possible. I hope you never have to deal with these types of situations, but it is important to be prepared on the front end in case it ever does happen to you. So buy those gloves and any other items of personal protective equipment that you think you might need. Put those items to good use if you have to assist with lambing/kidding. At the very minimum please wear gloves to protect yourself! Frequent hand washing and not eating/drinking in the barn are also good practices that can help keep you, your family, and any employees you might have safe and healthy. It is easy to forget how vulnerable we are to the same diseases that affect our sheep and goats, but it is not a lesson that you want to learn the hard way. Contact your local county extension agent, your veterinarian, or myself (jharri50@utk.edu) if you have further questions about abortions in sheep and goats or ways to stay healthy during lambing/kidding season.

Jessy Shanks, is the Small Ruminant and Youth Programs Specialist at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Jessy raises Southdown and Dorper sheep with her husband and daughter just below Knoxville. Her background is in reproductive physiology and she enjoys teaching producers and youth about small ruminants in any way possible.

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