

Scrapie

General Information

Scrapie, first identified in 1732, is a fatal infectious disease of sheep and goats. It is a "Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathy" (TSE), as is BSE in cattle and CJD in humans. Scrapie however, as distinct from BSE or CJD, is naturally transmissible in the wild between sheep and goats.

The Importance of Scrapie

Scrapie is an important disease of sheep and goats. A cautious approach must be taken to TSEs in all species following links between BSE in cattle and new variant CJD in humans. Small numbers of sheep or goats may have been exposed to BSE contaminated meat and bone meal during the BSE epidemic. Infection of a sheep or goat with Scrapie might mask infection with BSE because sheep experimentally infected with BSE are difficult to distinguish from those infected with Scrapie.

Scrapie has been experimentally transmitted to species other than sheep or goats. There is no evidence that Scrapie transmits to humans.

Notification of Scrapie Suspicion

Scrapie is a notifiable disease. You are legally obliged to notify the Department of Agriculture Fisheries and Food upon suspicion that a sheep or goat may be infected with Scrapie.

A Veterinary Inspector from The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food will examine any animal suspected of being infected with Scrapie. Upon confirming suspicion, the animal will be culled, slaughtered and tested. If the sheep is infected with Scrapie the farmer or owner will receive financial remuneration for the loss of the sheep.

Clinical Signs of Scrapie

Clinical signs of Scrapie are most common in 3 to 4 year old sheep but may be evident from 12 months of age.

Typical Clinical Signs will include some or all of the following: -

Changes in behaviour that may include: -

Lagging Behind the Flock; Refusal to be Gathered/Driven; Increased Nervousness/Hypersensitivity; Fear Response; Resenting Handling; Restless Grazing or Feeding; Drooping of Ears; Teeth Grinding; Depression or Vacant stare.

Changes in posture and movement that may include: -

Stumbling; High Stepping; Head Trembling; Weak Hind Legs; Crouching/Wide Based Stance; Inability to Stand.

Skin Irritation that may include: -

Localised Wool Loss or Signs of Rubbing; Rubbing of Hindquarters; Rubbing of the Poll; Rubbing of Flanks; Scratching at the Flank Area; Damage to the Skin; Nibbling; Scratch Reflex-Nibbling; Scratching of the Shoulder or Ear.

Chronic weight loss

Later signs of disease that may include: -

Inappetance; Recumbency; Convulsions.

Scrapie Control and Eradication

Farmers may breed for genetic resistance to the most common type of Scrapie in Ireland- known as "Classical Scrapie". Many farmers, particularly farmers breeding sheep of high genetic merit, have been involved in genotyping sheep from their flocks as part of the National Genotype Programme. The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food has subsidised this genotype programme between 2003 and 2008.

The Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food would recommend that all farmers use exclusively National Genotype Accredited Category 1 rams for breeding in order to eradicate "Classical Scrapie".

An EU-wide surveillance and Scrapie control programme has been in place since 2002. In Ireland, this involves testing of sheep routinely slaughtered in abattoirs and dead sheep submitted to knackeries for disposal. (Farmers are legally obliged to dispose of all dead sheep and goats through knackeries).

A Veterinary Inspector will carry out an investigation on a farm or in a flock following identification of a sheep infected with "Classical Scrapie". If the veterinarian decides that a flock is infected with "Classical Scrapie", sheep susceptible to contracting "Classical Scrapie" and sheep that will breed lambs susceptible to contracting "Classical Scrapie" will be culled from the flock and the farmer will be remunerated financially.

This approach to eradication is necessary because the agent responsible for causing "Scrapie", presumed to be most commonly spread at lambing, can survive for long periods in the soil or in the environment.

Atypical Scrapie

New Scrapie strains, distinct from "Classical Scrapie", have been identified since 1998. These strains have been termed "Atypical Scrapie" strains. "Atypical Scrapie" does not appear to be as infectious as "Classical Scrapie".

Genetic resistance to "Atypical Scrapie" differs from "Classical Scrapie" resistance. In flocks EU-wide "Atypical Scrapie" cases have occurred singly or in small numbers.

Ireland has identified very small numbers of "Atypical Scrapie" cases to date.

To Report Scrapie Suspicion or for Scrapie Information please contact your local District Veterinary Office or ring the following help-line 1890 441 250.