

Soremouth

Soremouth, also known as orf (in humans), contagious ecthyma (CE) and contagious pustular dermatitis (CPD) is a virus in the family Poxviridae. Known since at least the 1800s, the disease is found throughout the world where sheep and goats are found. While animals of all ages and breeds are susceptible, young ones are more easily infected. Unlike most goat diseases, soremouth can also be transmitted to humans.

Course of Disease

Soremouth lesions begin to develop within 2-3 days of infection and within 11 days are visible. They usually start as blisters around the mouth, but can also affect the nose, the udder, the mouth, the throat, many other body parts and, in some cases, even the rumen and lungs. Young kids that get it can spread it to their mothers' udders.

The sores last from a week to a month and can be spread to other animals or by objects that come into contact with the virus (known as fomites). The virus stays in the scabs and has been found in dried scabs for many years after the animal has recovered.

After the blister stage the lesions turn into pustules and become scabby when they break. Goats that contract soremouth usually develop a strong immunity and are not re-infected for at least a year. While a malignant form of the disease has been reported, most animals recover easily as the disease runs its course. In cases where goats are exposed to thistles or other prickly bushes, they may have a harder time overcoming it, due to the skin breaks that let the virus in.

While soremouth is usually considered to be extremely infectious—with up to 100% of some herds showing signs—in other cases, only a few animals are affected. Young kids are more at risk for serious consequences. Where death occurs, it is generally because of secondary infection or a fly infestation.

Treatment

Because soremouth is caused by a virus, it can't be treated with antibiotics. Infected animals should be kept clean, and the disease will clear up in one to four weeks with no treatment. When I had soremouth in my herd, I did an experiment, treating one group with tea tree oil, another with triple antibiotic and the other with nothing. All of them recovered at the same rate; apparently none of the treatments made a difference.

One source recommends mixing Vaseline and iodine to treat the lesions, and also to keep insects off of them.

Whatever treatment (or non-treatment) regimen is used, make sure to wear gloves and avoid exposure of any cuts or wounds to the active lesions, as it can be spread to humans.

Prevention

A vaccine for soremouth is available, but it may even cause the disease in herds that have not previously been exposed. The best method for prevention is to either not bring new animals into your herd, or to quarantine those you do bring in. If a goat does show signs of soremouth, you can separate that animal until it recovers.

I tend to subscribe to the theory of exposing the other goats to mild cases of soremouth, in order to develop immunity in the herd. I haven't had an outbreak since the initial one, using this method. But then maybe I am just lucky.