

# Sheep & Beef Talk

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Rebecca Smith,  
Veterinarian

## Ryegrass Staggers

Do you know the signs and symptoms of Ryegrass Staggers in your animals? Read on to find out more.

Ryegrass staggers is a nervous disease affecting sheep, cattle, horses & deer after they have grazed endophyte-affected, ryegrass-dominant pastures under close grazing conditions. Ryegrass staggers should not be confused with "grass staggers"- a nervous disease caused by a deficiency of magnesium.

### What is Endophyte?

Endophyte is a fungus found in the leaf, leaf sheath, stem and seed of perennial ryegrass. The fungus produces several toxins; one of these toxins Peramine, is beneficial and protects the ryegrass plant from attack by the Argentine Stem Weevil, however unfortunately another toxin, Lolitrem B is the major toxin associated with ryegrass staggers.

Endophyte infected ryegrass has pasture production advantages over endophyte free ryegrass, but endophyte-free ryegrass will not cause ryegrass staggers.

### What is "Safe Ryegrass"?

There has been a vast amount of research done to create cultivars of ryegrass that are infected with endophyte fungi which produce low levels of Lolitrem B while still producing high levels of Peramine for protection against the Argentine Stem Weevil.

However, a lot of the older style ryegrass cultivars make up the majority of our sheep, beef and deer farming pastures and in years such as this where conditions are perfect for fungal growth with a sudden drying-off

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Alexandra  
P 03 440 2277

Ranfurly  
P 03 444 9615

Cromwell  
P 03 445 1229

Aspiring  
P: 03 443 7262

[vetent.co.nz](http://vetent.co.nz)  
[info@vetent.co.nz](mailto:info@vetent.co.nz)

## Ryegrass Staggers (continued)

forcing lower grazing residuals we see an "outbreak" pattern of ryegrass staggers.

### What will you see?

Ryegrass staggers tends to be more common during summer & autumn. Animals develop signs within 7-14 days of being placed on toxic pastures.

Lolitrems B affects nerves and muscles causing staggering when animals move. If animals get a sudden fright or are chased by dogs etc. they may fall over. When left to graze, affected animals can appear completely normal.

Diagnosis is based on clinical signs and the presence of endophyte infected pasture.

### What is the impact to your farm?

- **Reduced Animal Growth Rates:** Growth rates of stock may be reduced, and in some cases there will be weight loss because the animal's ability to graze and compete for food is reduced. Affected animals may also be difficult to yard for routine procedures such as vaccinations and worm treatments.
- **Reduced ability to manage stock:** As eluded to above, affected animals are difficult to shift, so routine on-farm tasks such as crutching, dipping, drenching, vaccinating can become difficult as affected stock will be difficult to yard. It also makes grazing management a challenge as there will be pastures you will need to spell,

and others which you may need to graze earlier than intended, or that you had been saving for mating.

- **Reduced mating performance in ewes:** Whether this is due to less feed over mating due to having to graze some of it by affect stock to reduce the impact of the ryegrass staggers, or due to the fact that stock are still affected by ryegrass staggers when the ram is out, or that the rams themselves are affected, we must be aware that this can have an impact on this year's mating performance. Early detection, nutritional support and reduction of impact is essential to ensure stock are in the best condition possible prior to mating.
- **Misadventure:** In severe cases stock losses may result from misadventure e.g. drowning in dams, caught in natural hazards such as gullies, ditches and fences.

### What can we do about it?

There is no specific treatment for affected animals, they will recover spontaneously after a few weeks. Recovery will be faster if animals can be shifted to pastures that do not contain infected ryegrass, or fed supplements before grazing the affected pasture to avoid grazing to very low residuals. If moving stock onto high-sugar alternate forages such as lucerne or red clover remember to

ensure they are up-to-date with their clostridial disease vaccinations.

There is a trial from NZ in 1981 where supplementation with magnesium sulphate & potassium chloride assisted in the recovery of affected stock. We have a formulation of this combined with a toxin binder available in stock at your local VetEnt clinic, which can be used to dose affected animals. The worst affected can also be supported with appetite stimulants and high energy concentrates if required.

Whenever possible ensure animals are not at risk of falling down banks or into water drains, as the greatest losses experienced from ryegrass staggers is due to misadventure.

Contact your [local VetEnt Clinic](#) to learn more about how to manage ryegrass staggers in your animals and pick up some products to support them back to optimal health.

### Reminders for April

- Knockout drench lambs with novel drench.
- Palpate any rams still not tested prior to mating.
- Ensure Toxovax is given at least 4 weeks prior to mating.
- Drench weaner calves with the right product.
- BVD blood test 15 cattle at pregnancy testing.
- Test trace elements in stock prior to winter.
- Give Iodine prior to mating.

If you have questions about any of the above, give your local VetEnt clinic a call.



Hannah Catley,  
Veterinarian

## Teaser Use in Hoggets

Hogget breeding can increase the number of lambs weaned on a farm each year and increase lifetime performance, but only if done correctly.



Mating hoggets' is an effective method of increasing lifetime productivity and efficiency of your ewe flock. If you are mating your hoggets, the use of teaser rams can result in a more compact lambing period and possibly even increase the lambing percentage in your hoggets.

A teaser ram is a ram that has been vasectomised (they still have their testicles so are still keen to get the job done, however, they are permanently infertile). Teasers are introduced into the flock immediately prior to the breeding season. Teasers can be used in hoggets (and ewes) to synchronise breeding activity through increasing the number of ewes mated in the first 17 days of the breeding period.

A prerequisite for a response to a teaser is that the

hoggets are isolated from rams for at least 21 days before the ram is introduced. It's the pheromones present in the rams wool that gets the girls going. The theory behind it is when the teasers are introduced, the onset of the breeding season in a proportion of the hoggets will be enhanced which can result in a more synchronised breeding season. Studies have shown that the majority of ewes that are exposed to a teaser ram will display oestrus 17 to 25 days after the introduction of the teaser into the group. Another factor is that the increased exposure to the teaser ram allows increased sexual experience before the entire rams are put into the flock.

If you are thinking about using teasers, the following should be considered:

- The breed. Some breeds are "horny" and seem to be very sexually active, these guys do a better job and include breeds such as Suffolk and Poll Dorset.
- Make sure the timing is correct - you can have a chat to us about this if you're unsure.
- Teasers need to be ready prior to the breeding season, so make sure you get the surgery done in advance of the breeding season.

The end result of using teasers may be more lambs born early, which results in earlier docking and increased number of lambs sold at weaning. Please give [your nearest VetEnt clinic](#) a call to discuss whether teasers are right to use with your hoggets.

## Liver Biopsies in Cattle

'Trace elements' are elements needed in minute, or trace amounts in order for proper growth and development. The main trace elements we are interested in for beef cattle production are selenium and copper.

Start thinking about testing in April to determine the trace element status of your herd. This will highlight any deficiencies and also

determine if the levels will be sufficient coming into the winter and subsequent calving period. This is particularly important if you have

had a history of deficiency on your farm, or if your stock have been performing poorly.

The two tools we have avail-

## Liver Biopsies in Cattle (continued)

able in assessing trace element status are blood tests and liver biopsies. A blood test gives us information on the current trace element levels, but does not give us any information about the level of trace elements in reserve. Because copper is stored in the liver, we get more information from a liver biopsy as to the level in reserve, which can replenish blood levels when necessary. This is particularly important for copper, as the availability decreases through the winter period which coincides with the time copper is needed the most - during pregnancy. It is necessary to determine that liver copper levels will

be able to maintain blood levels throughout this period.

Liver biopsies are obtained with the animal in a standing position. Local anaesthetic is applied to the skin and underlying muscles of the ribs. A biopsy trochar is inserted into this space and a core of liver is obtained.

Soil and pasture tests are other tools we can use to aid in building up the trace element picture on your farm. This is used to determine the level of other 'antagonist' elements such as molybdenum, sulfur and iron in the soil which can influence the level of trace

elements available to the animal and hence affects the level of supplementation needed.

Obtaining baseline values of trace element levels in your herd now avoids inappropriate supplementation and therefore reduces unnecessary cost; and vice versa. It can ensure that the level of supplementation you are currently providing is sufficient for the optimal production of your herd.

Please contact [your local VetEnt Clinic](#) to book in your Trace Element testing for this season.

