What is Coccidiosis?

How Does it Affect Small Ruminants on a Homestead?

Coccidia are actually small protozoa. In a normal healthy flock, a small amount of coccidia will not make your animals sick. So what happens to change this? As is the case with many opportunistic infections, the parasite looks for an opportunity to strike. In the right conditions and a weakened physical condition, illness will occur.

When we brought Joey and Ike home last spring, they both had some minor bouts of worms and parasites. Both came from
reputable, caring, and well maintained farms. I say that to make the point that this is a common although often self limiting illness. If caught early, which it was, in our cases, the animal is treated and recovers quickly.

Coccidiosis in small ruminents.
Young ruminants on pasture with are more susceptible to cocci than adults. Adult animals will most likely have some oocysts but they often have developed immunity. Cocci infections or coccidiosis is an opportunistic type of parasite. Illness is more likely to occur in young animals and lambs or kids. The normal activities that often are part of the life of young ruminants can contribute to them having an episode of coccidiosis. Shipping the animals can lead to lack of feed being ingested, which can lead to a weakened animal. Also, chilling, stress, crowded conditions and new stressful surroundings will make a young animal more susceptible.

Crowded conditions is a big factor in coccidia infestation. Over grazing pastures and failure to rotate grazing areas are other contributing factors. The protozoan must live for a part of its life cycle, outside of the host animal. Grazing
on very short or sparse grass will cause the animal to eat more of the oocysts that have been shed in the feces of the flock. Animals that are susceptible due to the conditions mentioned above will quickly take on too many oocysts that will mature inside the muscle tissue, stomach and small intestine and cause illness. Most mature animals have developed some level of immunity to coccidia. The majority of times it will be seen in the young, newly acquired or developing lambs and kids. If you are keeping sheep or goats in a confinement set up, cleanliness if even more important.

Symptoms of Coccidiosis
Goats and sheep infected with coccidia will have symptoms such as failure to thrive, mild diarrhea, loss of appetite, and anemia. The condition can worsen until the animal nears death from the symptoms.

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Weather and Coccidiosis

Cocci need a period of time for the oocysts to live outside of a host. Sunlight and dry conditions prohibit the eggs from developing and may keep the outbreak contained. During wet,
Prevention and Treatment

There are preventative products on the market and sold at farm supply stores. Sulmet and Albon are two such chemical products.

If you prefer not to use commercial products on your animal, FiasCo Farm has had good results using an herbal preparation that is described here.

Rotate Pastures

Feed a nutritious ration if feeding grain is needed. Be sure it contains the necessary nutrients, vitamins, and minerals required by the animal you are feeding.
Do not put newly arrived, weakened lambs or kids in the pasture with adult animals. Build up a healthy immune system first with sufficient feed, clean water and good quality hay or separate grazing area.

Allow fields and pastures to dry out between grazing.

In smaller acreage or large fenced paddocks, clean up the waste often. Remove wet and soiled hay. Maintain a dry ground or add clean bedding.

Forward graze the lambs or kids.* Allow them to go ahead of the adults into a new area for grazing.

Treatment consists of a course of antibiotics and correction of management factors.

In an animal with an acute infection, antibiotics are prescribed. Coccidiostats may help prevent an infestation but not necessarily take care of an existing infection.

Keep in mind that adult animals can become infected, too, it is just less likely. Circumstances such as a stressful delivery, another illness or unsanitary conditions can cause any animal to have an over load of coccidia.
Do I Need to Worry About Other Animals Becoming Infected From The Kids and Lambs?

The research on this is not conclusive either way. It used to be thought that the coccidia were species specific. Some research has shown that eating an intermediate host such as a rodent can lead to infection. When there is any risk or question, taking a fecal sample to a veterinary lab for analysis can answer the question.

*forward grazing is a term used to describe the practice of allowing the lambs to venture into the new pasture area first, by holding the adult sheep back by a fence. The fence allows the smaller animals to go through but prevents the larger adults from getting through to the other side.*
Looking for information specific to chickens?  Coccidiosis in Poultry by Rhonda from the Farmer’s Lamp

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