

RYEGRASS STAGGERS

Perennial rye grass staggers

This occurs in mid-summer and early autumn, during periods of warmer weather combined with sufficient rain to allow rye grass to shoot. Risk subsides with onset of cooler weather. The staggers is usually most evident in weaners.

Cause of Perennial Rye Grass Staggers

PRG staggers is caused by endophyte in the ryegrass. These endophytes produce a number of chemicals. Some protect the rye grass from insect attack and thus help the rye grass to be more persistent, While others are toxic to livestock causing a number of syndromes including staggers.



Microscopic view of the endophyte (fungi) growing in the ryegrass – black strand in photo left.

Photo courtesy of Lester Fletcher Ag-Research NZ

Mustering mob elicits rapid onset of staggers and seizure. When left alone, most rye grass staggers sheep recover.



Cast sheep with severe rye grass staggers Hamilton April 2002



Hyperthermia syndrome

Lismore, Victoria, May 1993 Photo courtesy of Kevin Reed PVI Hamilton



- Affected sheep head for the nearest water to cool off, and when the problem is combined with staggers, they are then vulnerable to drowning

Other Signs

- As well as rye grass staggers and hyperthermia, toxins from the endophyte affected rye grass can cause 20% reduced growth rates and increased dag.

Prevention of Perennial Rye Grass Staggers

- Inspect sheep twice weekly during summer on pastures where cases have occurred previously and move sheep to low risk paddocks as soon as you detect the first signs of staggers. Move sheep gently without dogs.

- In early summer, graze at risk paddocks and spell low risk paddocks, so you then have pasture saved on low risk paddocks for use in late summer/early autumn.
- If you have no safe low risk pastures, you may have to set up containment paddock feedlots for weaners, in particular.

Treatment

- Most sheep recover from staggers in a few minutes if left alone.
- Staggers can no longer be elicited in mobs within 1- 4 weeks of moving to a safer paddock. Thus rye grass staggers is normally of low consequence and nil other treatment required.
- In severe outbreaks, sheep will get cast and this can cause high mortalities which occurred in 1986 and 2002 in south west Victoria. Cast sheep need intensive treatment and or prompt euthanasia
- Feed and water can be left alongside sheep in trench. Majority recover enough in 36–48 hours to not get cast when taken out of trench.

Trench for supporting cast rye grass staggers sheep



Annual Rye Grass Toxicity (Staggers) (ARGT)

- An infection of a worm in the rye grass seed head produces a toxin to cause ARGT in mid Oct to mid Dec.
- ARGT was first reported in SA in 1955 and WA in 1969. Since then it has spread slowly across the wheat belt areas of these States.

Signs

- Mildly effected sheep display high-stepping, in-coordinate gait when a mob is briskly mustered for 100–200 metres.
- More severely affected sheep fall over with convulsions.
- Death can occur within a few hours to a week of signs first becoming apparent.

Prevention

- Purchase of rye grass hay or uncleaned rye grass seed from an affected area are the most likely means of introduction
- This is another reason to avoid purchasing hay from out of your immediate district

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