

MENINGEAL WORM – A NEW RISK FOR REGIONAL PRODUCERS
GIL MYERS, PhD
MYERS PARASITOLOGY SERVICES
MAGNOLIA, KY 42757

Reports of Meningeal worm known also as “deer worm”, are becoming more common as goat flocks become more numerous. Meningeal worm is a parasite of white tailed deer. When goat and sheep graze pastures regularly visited by deer they can become infected. Posterior paralysis leading to death can occur as a result of this infection. Additional financial losses can include extensive supportive care, veterinary visits, and repeated dewormings in an attempt to kill the larvae after they enter the spinal canal of infected goats and sheep. A assortment of land slugs serve as the intermediate host in the life-cycle of the Meningeal worm. Wet weather favors slug populations.

Black slugs up to 1 inch long were commonly observed last year on Kentucky pastures. It is estimated that less than 10% of Kentucky farms have experienced this problem. While not as common as other parasites such as *Haemonchus spp.* and coccidia, Meningeal worm is a potential problem for small ruminants on pasture in our region.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

Posterior paralysis of a few animals in the flock can be an indication of Meningeal worm infection. This is usually the first evidence of a Meningeal worm problem. Visible migratory tracks under the skin of goats have been reported. The migrating worm larvae appear to cause goats to scratch and lick themselves.

Farms with wet areas provide favorable habituate for slugs. However, slugs can also be found in well drained pastures surrounded by woods. Producers with such areas are reporting Meningeal worm problems. Be alert for Meningeal worm problems, especially if deer frequent your pastures.

TIMING OF INFECTIONS

Infections can develop following late spring /summer grazing. A swaying uncoordinated walk can be observed within several months after infection. Producers typically observe this problem in animals during late summer and fall. Diagnosis by a veterinarian or diagnostic lab is important. Diagnosis provides knowledge that Meningeal worm is a problem on your farm. This information is then useful in the design of prevention measures and treatment programs.

PREVENTION

Producers that have had Meningeal worm diagnosed by your veterinarian or suspect Meningeal worm should consider management options which can help prevent Meningeal worm problems.

The following steps can help prevent Meningeal worm problems.

- 1) Discourage deer with fencing and/or guard dogs. High tensile 4-5 strand fences will discourage deer especially if the pastures contain a number of livestock.
- 2) Fence off ponds. In central Kentucky, a producer who lost goats to Meningeal worm fenced the goats away from ponds. His losses from Meningeal worm ceased as a result. In Central Kentucky farm ponds are well defined and easily fenced.
- 3) Aggressive poultry such as geese and guinea fowl eat slugs. Their use can reduce slug populations.
- 4) This summer one Central Kentucky producer is applying slug bait to an area where his goats developed the problem last year. Slug bait is widely available at most farm stores. These baits are designed to be consumed by slugs which then die.
- 5) Preventive deworming during the summer can also help prevent the problem of Meningeal worm. If you have had the problem in a previous year, your animals may be at risk of infection again this year. Modern dewormers such as Safe-Guard, also sold through veterinarians as Panacur, kill worms throughout the body. Preventive deworming at a 30-45 day intervals during the summer may kill the migrating larvae of the Meningeal worm and reduce losses. This option should only be considered on farms with a history of Meningeal worms losses.

If you suspect Meningeal worm problems contact your veterinarian for assistance on the diagnosis and treatment of this new parasite problem.