

Orf

Background Information

Orf is a skin disease of sheep and goats caused by a virus. It can spread to humans who are in close contact with infected animals. It causes localised lesions on the skin and is not a serious disease.

Organism

Orf virus – a parapox virus

Incidence and Transmission

Orf causes pustular or ‘scabby’ lesions around the mouth and nostrils of lambs and may spread to the teats of ewes and the legs of lambs. The disease can be spread to people who are in direct contact with infected animals.

There is no spread from person to person.

A live vaccine is available which can prevent infection in sheep and goats. However, people can become infected if they have close contact with recently vaccinated animals or have an inoculation injury.

Only very low numbers of cases are reported, although it is thought that the disease is actually much more common among farmers, but they do not visit their GP about it because it is often a mild illness.

Occupations and processes where Orf may present a risk

Occupational exposure to Orf virus may occur in those who:

- are in contact with infected animals – particularly while bottle feeding lambs, sheep shearing and slaughtering sheep;
- work with materials or products from infected animals – particularly handling infected wool or carcasses; or
- are in contact with recently vaccinated animals or have a vaccine inoculation injury.

Occupations where there may be a risk of occupationally acquired Orf include:

- farmers – particularly sheep and goat farmers;
- sheep shearers;
- abattoir workers, meat processing plant workers and butchers; and
- veterinary surgeons – close contact with infected animals or inoculation injury.

Clinical Information

The incubation period is 3–6 days. Orf tends to appear as one or a few skin lesions, generally on the fingers, hand or forearm. The lesions start as small, firm, red or reddish-blue lumps which enlarge to flat-topped, blood-tinged pustules about 2–3 cm across. There may be a mild fever for a few days. The lesions generally heal within 6 weeks without any treatment, unless they become very red, swollen and painful.

Anyone with painful lesions should seek medical attention, as they may require antibiotic treatment.

Control

The following control measures reduce the risk of infection:

- People working in direct contact with infected sheep or goats should cover cuts and abrasions with waterproof dressings and wear protective gloves.
- Good occupational hygiene practices should be followed, especially washing with warm water and soap.
- A suitable disinfectant should be used.
- A live vaccine is available for sheep, but it should only be used on farms where there is already orf infection.

Further Information

[Public Health England – Orf](#)