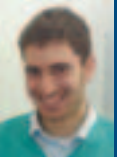




Care of Ewes and Lambs at Lambing Time



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The lambing season begins for the sheep

producer, when the rams are allowed access to ewes in season. At this time plans are made for lambing, which will occur in 142 to 152 days, depending on the breed.

Gestation

Ewes can be wormed when taken off pasture with wormers that are safe during pregnancy. The ewes, as well as the newborn lambs, should remain free of worms until turned out on pasture in the spring. The ewe may be vaccinated 4 to 6 weeks prior to lambing. This will increase the level of these antibodies in the colostrum (first milk), which protects against bacteria and viruses in the newborn. In areas where selenium is deficient, the ewe can be given vitamin E injections at 60 days and again 15 days before lambing.

During the last 4 to 6 weeks of gestation, ewes should be fed good quality hay, if pasture is not available, and about one pound of grain per day. Seventy percent of the foetal growth occurs at this time. The extra energy from the grain will help prevent pregnancy toxemia and offset shrinking of the rumen caused by the enlarging uterus. Exercise is important at this time. Keep ewes on pasture as long as possible in the winter.

Birth Process

Labour or parturition in ewes is divided into 3 stages. The first stage is uterine contractions and cervical dilation that usually lasts about 12 to 14 hours. The second stage is the actual labour and delivery. During this process, the membranes usually rupture and break the water bag, lubricating the birth canal. In this stage, the ewe physically strains itself in order to expel the lamb. If the lamb is not delivered in an hour, the ewe may need assistance. The third stage includes expulsion of membranes and shrinking of the uterus. Difficult birth is termed "dystocia" and may be caused by abnormal presentation of the lamb. Some causes are one or both forelimbs turned back, deviations of the head, breech presentation, posterior presentation or ringwomb "undilated cervix". Whatever the problem it must be corrected as soon as possible by either an experienced shepherd or a Vet. If the shepherd cannot correct the problem a Vet is needed urgently. He or she may need to perform a caesarian section. The sooner surgery is performed, the greater the chances are of a live lamb being delivered. Breech and posterior presentations should be delivered as rapidly as possible.

Care of the Newborn

Breaking the umbilical cord too soon will prevent oxygen from passing to the lamb; if this occurs, respiration must be established as soon as possible after expulsion. Gently pressing on the rib cage may start the lamb breathing. Other methods are tickling the nose with straw or gently swinging the lamb. Be careful to avoid all objects. Vigorous rubbing may also stimulate breathing.

Once the lamb is safely breathing the ewe is encouraged to lick the lamb. If the temperature is cold put the newborn may need a heat lamp to dry until the second and/or third lamb arrives. Turn off the heat lamp as soon as the lamb can maintain its body temperature. Heat lamps may cause pneumonia in the newborn lamb.

After delivery the navel area is dipped or sprayed with an antibiotic spray (blue spray) to prevent infection entry. The newborn lamb is put on the teat as soon as possible. When the sucking reflex is evident, help the lamb to nurse on its own. Colostrum provides immunity for the newborn. Vaccinations should begin when the lambs are 3-4 weeks of age. Two to four weeks later a second vaccination should be given.

Care of the Postpartum Ewe

The ewe may be weak following the difficult labour and she may not mother her newborn immediately. If the placenta (afterbirth) is not expelled within 25 hours after birth, she needs to

be treated. Plenty of fresh water should be provided for the ewe and high quality hay on the day following delivery. Then gradually adding concentrated grain to the diet.

Lamb Survival

The lamb's survival depends on a successful partnership between the lamb and ewe. About 90% of mortality cases occur within a week of birth.

The major causes are starvation, mismothering and exposure with death occurring 1-2 days after birth. Starvation can be prevented with bottlefeeding.

This includes colostrum consumption within the first hour after birth. Colostrum can be frozen and kept on hand. Thaw slowly to prevent the breakdown of antibodies. Mismothering may require restraining the ewe. Eventually, she will claim the lamb. The most difficult situation to correct is the ewe claiming one twin but not the other. Exposure to cold or hypothermia, is caused when the lamb fails to maintain body temperature. The lamb prevents body temperature from falling to dangerous levels by increasing heat production through shivering. This burns the fat energy reserves. The lamb reduces heat loss by reducing blood supply to the skin and extremities. When ambient temperatures are above the lamb's body temperature, it may die of dehydration and heat stroke. Fortunately most lambs survive and we see them playing in the local fields alongside their mothers during the spring.

