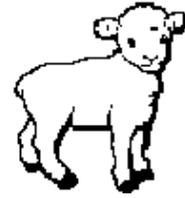


# Lambing from A to Z

So your Ewe is pregnant ... Now what?



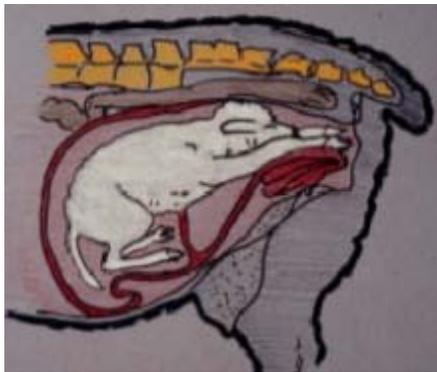
- Early Gestation The first part of the fetal development. The nutritional needs are very high quality forages and grains due to the fact that she is developing one or more feti. During this time, the bones and muscular system is being formed for the young.
- Mid-Gestation During this phase is pregnancy the ewe's nutritional needs are still pretty high. This is for the future of milk production and growth of the feti. This is the time that you can ultrasound the ewe to see how many she is carrying and to double check that she really is pregnant.
- Late Gestation This is the part that is the most work for the least cost. I mean that because the ewe's nutritional needs aren't that great other than protein and energy. You can let them graze on pasture (if weather cooperates) and give them hay. During this time many farmers do routine vaccines. Some of the vaccines that are important during this time are E. Coli and tetanus. This then is present in the colostrum. During this time, many shear their ewes to help aid in cleanliness of udder and disease prevention.



- Heading towards the outside world Since the gestation length of the sheep is 140-145 days you can begin to look for signs that the little one will be coming as early as 135 days after you bred her.

## The Normal Birth Process

- First Stage of Labor (cervical dilation) - The first stage of birth consists of uterine contractions and cervical dilation. It may last anywhere between 2 and 14 hours. The ewe may be uncomfortable, but is not yet fully straining to deliver the lamb. She may exhibit behavioral changes such as isolating herself, pawing to create a nest, and acting uneasy.
- Second Stage of Labor (expulsion of the lamb) - The lambs feet or head entering the vagina induces the second stage of labor, which is actual labor and delivery. The ewe will use abdominal contractions and actively work to expel the fetus. It is normal that a ewe will pass her water bag prior to delivery. This stage should take no longer than 1 - 2 hours, but it is suggested that you check the ewe if delivery has not yet begun after 40 - 60 minutes after the water bag appears.
- Third Stage of Labor (expulsion of membrane) - The third stage of labor is when the animal expels the afterbirth.
- Normal Position of the Lamb



The correct presentation of a lamb is when the front feet emerge first with the muzzle nuzzled in between them (a diving position). The lamb should be in an upright position with its nose inline with the ewe's spinal column.

## When does the ewe need assistance?

- When to assist: You want to check the ewe if she has been actively straining or her water sac has been exposed for 40 - 60 minutes with no progress. Try not to rush the process, because a vaginal examination may cause greater risk of infection in the ewe and should be done only if necessary. Lambs can survive up to 8 - 10 hours after the second stage of birth begins. A ewe showing signs of major discomfort for more than 2 - 3 hours without active straining may be

another indication of a problem. In this case the fetus may not have reached the vagina due to positioning problems and would need to be checked.

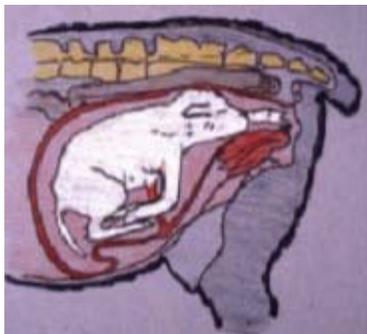
## What steps do I need to take?

- Isolate the animal: Once you have determined that the ewe may be experiencing problems you should try to get her in a relatively clean area, where her movement is limited, and other animals will not get in the way. It may be a good idea to have someone restrain the animal, if possible. You can assist the ewe while she is standing, but should be prepared for her to lie down.
- Be Clean: Clean the area around vaginal opening and wash your hands thoroughly prior to the examination. It is recommended that you wear a sleeve glove to protect yourself (especially women) from reproductive diseases commonly found in sheep.
- Lubricate: Lubrication is very important and you can not use too much! Failure to lubricate the birth canal may cause tissue damage and undoubtedly a very difficult birth.
- Check for dilation: When you enter the vagina keep your fingers close together so that you do not injure her reproductive track. Find your way to the cervix and determine if the ewe is dilated. If she is not fully dilated, you can give her more time and gently run your hand around the cervix to expand the opening. If the ewe does not progress toward dilation you may need to call a veterinarian for assistance.
- Determine presentation of fetus: If dilation has occurred, the next step is to palpate the fetus to establish its presentation; that is if it is facing forwards or backwards. Compare what you are feeling to the anatomy of the ewe to distinguish between front and back legs. Also make sure you follow the legs to the body to ensure you are working with one lamb and not two.
- Determine posture of fetus: Next you want to determine how the legs and head are positioned, the posture of the lamb. Visualize the normal presentation of the lamb as you think about what parts you are feeling.
- Pull: If everything is normal you can proceed by gently pulling the forelegs legs of the lamb in a downward motion. With your help the

- ewe should be able to give one final push and you will hopefully have a healthy new lamb.
- Double check: Be sure to feel for remaining lambs when the ewe stops exhibiting labor behavior.

## Causes of Dystocia (a difficult birth)

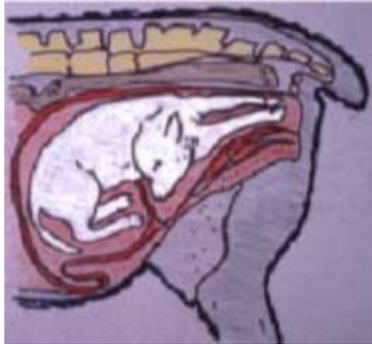
- Tight squeeze: There are many different problems that could occur during parturition, the most common problem seen in sheep is having a fetus that is too big to pass through the pelvis of the ewe. Firm pressure can be used as in a normal birth, but if delivery is not successful you can roll the ewe onto her back for delivery. If the lamb is still too big you should call for veterinary assistance. Your veterinarian can help you decide if a caesarian section is necessary.
- Malpresentation of the fetus: This is when the lamb is not in the correct position. There are several forms that are fairly common and are a likely cause of dystocia.
- One or both legs back:



The situation where only one leg is retained is a common problem. It can usually be solved by either pulling the lamb in that position, if there is enough room, or by pushing the body back far enough to get a hold of the leg and pull it forward for a normal position.

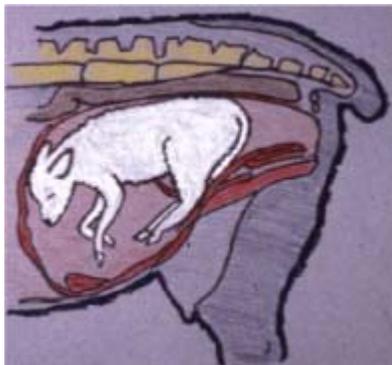
- When both legs are positioned backwards and the head is the only thing in the birth canal you have a more serious problem. Usually it is very difficult to push the head back in and attain a normal birthing position. In this situation you can try to assist, but should get assistance promptly, if your efforts are unsuccessful.

- Front legs only, head back



This is a very difficult malpresentation to deal with and requires patience when positioning the lamb correctly. You must gently search for the head and bring it into the correct position. A snare may be useful in holding limbs in place.

- Breech Position



In a breech position the animal is facing the wrong direction and both feet are facing forward. To deal with this case, you need to push the lamb forward and grasp one of the rear legs gently pulling it into the birth canal. Follow with the second leg. Be careful not to puncture the uterine lining with the toes. If lambs are situated a similar position, but feet are facing backwards, it is not a breech position. Lambs can usually be pulled in a backwards fashion with no problems, but pull gently, because the ribs are susceptible to breaks.

## For more information visit these websites:

- <http://ag.ansc.purdue.edu/sheep/>
- <http://ag.ansc.purdue.edu/sheep/articles/difbirth.html>
- <http://www.sheepandgoat.com/repropro.html>
- <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/Publications/PM829X7.pdf>

Diagrams provided by Utah State University:

<http://extension.usu.edu/publica/agpubs/ah/sheep11.pdf>

## Lambing: What to do afterwards

- Post-lambing pen: Post-lambing pens are crucial for lamb survival and lamb performance. Once the lambs are born, they must be taken with their mothers to a warm, clean, dry pen. An average size of a post-lambing pen is 5'x5'. This allows the young lambs' full access to the ewe's colostrum. The first 18 hours after birth is that of the most important. This is when the babies need to consume as much as their mother's milk (colostrum) to get the antibodies available for protection against diseases and viruses. Colostrum also gives the babies energy to keep them warm.
- Post-lambing pens also give the opportunity for the ewe and her young to:
  - Bond
  - Establish identification



### Clean up

- It is a good precaution to clean up any afterbirth just to reduce the spread of disease if any.

### Navel Disinfecting

- It is beneficial to disinfect the navels of the newborn lambs soon after birth to prevent [navel ill](#). To do this, spray or dip the navel in a 7% tincture of iodine or another good drying agent. Navels more 2 inches long should be clipped.

## Tail Docking

- Lamb tails should be docked within 3 to 10 days of birth. Docking not only reduces the chances of the lambs getting maggots but also gives the lambs a better appearance. If the lambs are ewe lambs and will be used for replacement ewes, then they will receive less problems during breeding and lambing.
- There are several pieces of equipment available to dock tails: a good old clean pocket knife can always do the job, a burdizzo (emasculatome), an elastrator (rubber rings), or an electric docker. Tails should be cut from 1 to 1 ½ inches from the body. The best place to cut is at the end of the caudal folds on the underside of the tail.

## Castration

- Ram lambs that will be marketed for meat should be castrated within 2 weeks of birth. The equipment available is the same for docking tails. The "cut and pull" method is the best method to assure that both testicles are removed from the animal.

For more defining information and pictures on tail docking and castration click [HERE](#).



## Record Keeping

- Having an easy, readable identification program is a must for a successful sheep operation. This will help you read your records more accurately and in a timely manner. Accurate records of which animals have been treated, sick, etc. is a key in managing your sheep operation.
- At birthing, a number of things should be recorded for future reference of the ewe:
  - Any birthing problems, assistance of the ewe
  - Number born alive and dead
  - Birth weights
- There are a number of things one can do to keep accurately identify each and every lamb.
  - Ear notching

- Ear tagging
- Paint branding
- Ink tattoos

**Project done by: Amy Bergstedt, Lindsey Crosby, Sarah Shaffer Spring 2003**

References:

"Goat Wisdom"

[http://www.goatwisdom.com/ch1baby\\_care/navel\\_ill.html](http://www.goatwisdom.com/ch1baby_care/navel_ill.html)

"Care of the Newborn lamb"

<http://ag.ansc.purdue.edu/sheep/ansc442/Semprojs/newborn/LambCare.htm>

"Newborn lambing management" Virginia Cooperative Extension

[http://www.ext.vt.edu/news/periodicals/livestock/aps-01\\_01/aps-0309.html](http://www.ext.vt.edu/news/periodicals/livestock/aps-01_01/aps-0309.html)

Management Guidelines for the efficient sheep production.

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