

Lambing for beginners

Contributed by Mad Cowman

For those who are new to looking after sheep, then lambing time is the most important part of the shepherding calendar. It is also the most nervous, stressful and rewarding time, especially for the novice shepherd. Hopefully my basic guide will offer some help to the new shepherds amongst the smallholding community.

{kl_thumbimage img="animals/robs_lamb1.jpg"}

Feeding

Feeding in the build up to lambing is important. The usual 'rule of thumb' guide is little and often. It is best to decide how much you are going to feed and then split it into two daily feeds. Do not over-feed as this will cause major problems. It is easier to 'push up' your feed if more is required but over fed ewes cannot be slimmed down.

The main problem with overfeeding is large lambs causing lambing difficulties, which is dire if you have young ewes. With older ewes it can be a main factor of causing Pregnancy Toxaemia or 'Twin Lamb Disease'. Both of these problems will leave you with dead lambs and ewes or high vets bills.

Getting Ready
Whether you have bought in pregnant ewes or you had them sired, you should know the approximate date of when your ewes are due to lamb. Lambing can occur two weeks either side of the lambing dates, so make sure you are ready in plenty of time. If possible it is best to lamb on straw. This could be an outside straw yard or an indoor shed. These need to be kept clean with plenty of fresh straw. You will also need some 'individual' pens if you are lambing more than one ewe. These should be big enough for the ewe to turn around in without treading on her lambs. It should also contain a water bucket, food bucket and hay rack.

Small items to have around are some sterile baby feed bottles to feed lambs some colostrums straight away, some long plastic gloves (lambing/calving gloves), also a hand sprayer or a teat dipper with some iodine solution and the vets phone number handy, just in case.

Early signs of lambing
From two weeks prior to the due dates, you should be checking your ewes twice daily. The first sign will be the ewe 'bagging up'. Milk will start trickling into the ewe's udder causing it to swell. Some ewes can start 'bagging up' a week before they lamb. Once the udder is really swollen, sometimes secreting milk out of the teats, then they usually lamb within 48 hours.

'Nesting' is usually the next sign. The ewe will disappear into a corner of a shed or yard and start 'pawing' at the ground. This is accompanied by the ewe walking around in small circles then lying down and standing back up with the ewe gently bleating when she stands up. When this is occurring then lambing is only twelve to twenty four hours away. You will need to check your ewe at two to three hour intervals.

The main event
After 'nesting' you will find that your ewe will be lying down for longer periods and pushing, occasionally getting up to sniff where she was lying and gently bleating because she expects a lamb to be there. This will happen before the water bag will show hanging from the vagina. Once the water bag shows then keep coming back to look every fifteen to twenty minutes. Some ewes can be put off if you stay and watch, especially ewe lambs and gimmers.

The next stage will be the feet showing. The ewe will still be getting up and down but a lot less often. The toes on the feet should be pointing upwards, shortly followed by the nose. The head and the feet will come out together and once the shoulders have come out then the lamb will easily drop out.

Once the lamb is out, make sure any membrane is brushed off the face with your hand and a soft piece of straw wiggled up the nose. The membrane has to be brushed off because if it left over the nose and mouth then the lamb will suffocate. The straw up the nose will cause the lamb to sneeze, stimulating the lungs to accept more air. The ewe might be up licking the lamb while you are doing this. If she is not then pull the lamb round to her nose and she will start to lick. Beware not to present the navel to her as it has been known for a keen ewe to lick a navel so hard that it has caused the stomach area to split and the intestines have come out. You also need to administer iodine solution to the lamb's navel as soon as possible after birth. This is done to prevent any germs entering the lamb through the navel before it heals.

Older ewes will usually have more than one lamb on board. Keep an eye on her as sometimes they will be so engrossed in the first lamb that they may lamb the second standing up. In these cases the lamb will drop and the ewe may not notice. If this happens then go in straight away and repeat the process as with the first lamb. There is a possibility that there may be a third. The best way to check this is to actually put your hand inside and see if there is another one there. I wouldn't really advise this unless you have been shown. The other way is to leave the ewe where she is for half an hour before moving her to an individual pen.

The easiest way to get the ewe to the individual pen is to pick the lamb up by the front legs, connect with the ewe by shoving the lamb under her nose and walk off slowly making sure that the ewe can see the lamb. It helps if you bleat as well as the ewe thinks it is the lamb bleating.

Once in the individual pen, make sure there is hay available at all times and water. If you have the water bucket on the floor of the pen then keep it out for the first couple of hours as new born lambs have a bad habit of falling in and drowning. Again feed any concentrates twice daily but check frequently as ewes can lay on lambs or disown one and bully it or refuse to let any suckle. If all goes well then they can be released out of individual pens after 48 hours. It is advisable that you mark the ewes and lambs with marker spray or stick before they are released as if there is a problem with the ewe or lambs then you can identify the rest of that little family group.

Hopefully, I have given you a basic insight to lambing. If your local agricultural college runs a lambing course then it money well spent. Otherwise, your nearest sheep farmer may show you the basics in exchange for a few hours hard graft.

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