

Care of the Newborn Lamb

The first few hours of a lamb's life are crucial for ensuring its survival, and getting off to a good start can mean fewer problems and better productivity in the future. Simple husbandry practices can be used to ensure that every lamb gets the best possible beginning to life.

The lamb's navel should be dipped in iodine, ensuring coverage up to the body wall, to disinfect the navel and reduce the risk of it being a point of entry for bacterial infection.

The most important aspect of newborn lamb care is ensuring the lamb has had sufficient colostrum within six hours of birth. Colostrum contains essential nutrients and antibodies to provide the energy, nutrients and immune protection the lamb needs in the first days and weeks of life. Lambs that do not receive colostrum within six hours of birth are more likely to become hypothermic, be poor doers, and have health problems in the short, medium and longer term.

You can check whether a young lamb has fed by feeling its abdomen. If the lamb is hollow or you are unsure whether it has received adequate quantities of colostrum, first try to assist it to suckle from the ewe. Check the udder of the ewe to ensure milk is present and teat size or position isn't preventing suckling. Restrain her carefully and guide lamb towards the teat.

If the lamb is unable to suckle, you can milk the ewe and administer colostrum to the lamb via stomach tube. Initially feed 75-150mls followed by 50mls/kg every 4hours until the lamb can feed independently. If the ewe does not produce sufficient colostrum, powdered colostrum may be used, although this should be a last resort. You may find it useful to milk ewes with excess colostrum to ensure that you have some for any lambs that need it. Colostrum can be stored fresh in the fridge for two days, or frozen in small, portion-sized pots or bags for several months, ensuring a deep freeze. These should be thawed slowly as required by immersing them in hot water.



Figure 1: Checking ewe's teat for milk production

If the lamb seems weak, take its temperature. For more information on what to do if a lamb is hypothermic, see Care of the Hypothermic Lamb.

Check the lamb for congenital abnormalities. Common problems include cleft palate, atresia ani, entropion and hernia:

- *Cleft palate* – This causes causes regurgitation of milk and nasal discharge, and may also be detected by placing your finger into the lamb's mouth and feeling along the roof of the mouth to check for defects. It can also cause pneumonia as the milk enters the lungs, and is often hereditary. It is often difficult to surgically repair so the lamb may need to be euthanased.

- *Atresia ani* – This is an absence or closure of the anus. You should lift the lamb's tail to check that it has an open anus – the presence of faeces indicates that the digestive system is functioning. Sometimes this can be easily repaired by a veterinary surgeon, but on other occasions a long length of intestinal tract is missing, which cannot be easily repaired and euthanasia may be necessary. Consult your vet to determine the best way forward.
- *Entropion* – examine both eyes to look for in turned eyelids. These can be manually corrected and held using clips where necessary. See entropion factsheet for more detail.
- *Hernia* – examine the lamb's navel to check for umbilical hernia. Hernias are holes in the body wall, and lengths of fat, intestine or abdominal contents can pass through the hole and sit beneath the skin. They feel like soft lumps at the umbilicus, and can be inherited or caused by an umbilical infection. Some hernias are small and remain the same size, and can be monitored. Others are larger, and can change size – this is because fat, lengths of intestine and other abdominal contents move through the hole in the body wall and become trapped beneath the skin, which can be very serious. Large hernias or those that change in size should be treated by a vet.

It is important to check young lambs regularly to ensure they continue feeding. Inadequate colostrum in early life can increase the likelihood of lambs contracting infections, such as watery mouth. This is when bacteria from the environment colonise the lamb's gut, causing abdominal distension and profuse salivation, hence the name, and unless caught early there is a high risk of mortality. It is particularly common in indoor lambing systems, where dirty bedding provides a good environment for the bacteria to survive. The risk can therefore be mitigated by excellent hygiene in the lambing shed, including mucking out pens between ewes and ensuring clean, dry bedding is available at all times.

If you suspect watery mouth, treat promptly with oral antibiotic (Spectam), and ensure the lamb is hydrated by administering 50ml/kg electrolyte solution with added glucose (10g/100ml solution. This should be fed 3-4 times a day for 24hours, and the lamb should be kept warm using a heat lamp if necessary, and segregated to prevent the spread of infection).

Getting things right with newborn lambs can take time, but will pay off in the long run with improved productivity and reduced mortality. For more information on any of these issues, contact your veterinary surgeon.

