Ewe Obstetrics and Newborn Lamb Management

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It really doesn’t matter what you do, ewes will decide for themselves when they want to lamb. You can, however, be prepared for lambing and the potential problems that can occur. The most common physical sign of impending lambing or parturition in the ewe is the udder begins to fill or bag up. If ewes have a short fleece, one may also observe a softening of the tissues around the dock. The vulva enlarges and a colorless mucous discharge, the cervical mucus plug, may be observed. Even observing these signs in ewes only gives one an approximate time of lambing as these observations may be present a week before lambing.

Parturition occurs in three stages. The first stage of parturition lasts from 2 to 12 hours, the time during which the cervix dilates. During this stage, ewes will try to isolate themselves. In a crowded barn, this may be in a corner or up against a wall. The ewe acts uncomfortable, getting up and down, lifting her lip, pawing the ground, and frequently urinating. Ewes do not “push” at this stage but the uterus is contracting causing dilation of the cervix. Some ewes seem to stare off into space and then go back to chewing their cud or eating.

The second stage of parturition is expulsion of the lamb. This stage is fairly quick, only lasting 1 to 2 hours. The water bag may be observed followed by the feet and the head. There should be steady progress once the water bag is observed or appearance of the feet. If the ewe strains longer than 45 minutes without producing a lamb, she should be checked for problems. Ewes may rest between delivering twins, but twins should be delivered within 45 minutes of the first delivery.

Cleanliness is important when examining a ewe for problems. Contamination of the uterus can lead to serious infection that will negatively impact the health of not only the ewe but also the newborn. Likewise, it protects the shepherd as well. The ewe’s vulva should be cleaned with a mild soap and water solution. The shepherd should use an obstetrical sleeve and apply generous amounts of lubrication on the sleeve before entering the vagina.

The most common problem observed in ewes with dystocia, difficult birth, is fetal postural abnormalities. Normally, the lamb is born with the front legs extended followed by the head. The head should be 2 to 4 inches from the tip of the toes. If the head is right on top of the toes, the lamb may be “stuck” because the elbows are caught. Pulling on one leg at a time and fully extending the limb usually resolves this problem. If difficulty occurs in trying to manipulate the fetus, raising the hind quarters of the ewe sometimes allows the uterus to fall forward and reduces the ewe straining allowing for easier repositioning.
A common problem occurs when twins are trying to come out at the same time with each having a leg in the birth canal. One should follow each leg back to the chest to ensure that the legs presented are of the same lamb. If the head and 2 different legs are presented, it is best to gently push the head back in and then replace the leg and retrieve the other matching leg. Be sure to guard the feet as they are sharp and can tear the uterus. In any ewe dystocia, always keep in mind that you may have more than one lamb coming out at the same time.

Sometimes the legs appear but the head seems to be missing. Again check to be sure the legs belong to the same lamb. The head may be turned back or down between the legs. In any case, by gently pushing back on the lamb’s brisket, one will usually have enough room to manipulate the head into the proper position.

Sometimes a ewe may not strain but the membranes are present or the tail is present but no legs. When you examine the ewe, the lamb’s butt is pushed up against the pelvis and the legs are extended forward. This is referred to as a true breech. Gently push the butt forward and reach under to grab one of the legs. Place a finger around the hock and gently retract, then reach forward and grab the foot. With the hand around the foot, guarding the toe from penetrating the uterine wall, bring the toe to the middle and push the hock to the side while lifting the toe into the vagina. Repeat with the other leg. Place the tail between the legs, this reduces the chances of tearing the uterus and remove the lamb.

The third stage of parturition is expulsion of the placenta. The placenta should pass within 8 hours of lambing. If the placenta retains, the ewe’s appetite should be monitored as well as her temperature for a fever (>103.3). If the ewe goes off feed or develops a fever, she should be given penicillin. Mild traction can be applied to the placenta but it should not be torn. If the ewe remains bright, alert, and eating, nothing needs to be done and eventually the placenta will fall out.

Lambs should be born in a dry draft free environment to reduce the risk of hypothermia. Lambs attempt to stand and nurse within 30 minutes of birth. The ewe should have been crutched and clipped around the flank so the lambs have easy access to the teats. If lambs are being crushed, shearing may reduce this problem as ewes can’t feel the lambs when overly fleeced. Lambs should nurse within the first 2 hours of birth. Lambs should receive 50ml of colostrum per kg of body weight (3/4 oz/lb) during the first 2 hours and a total of 200 – 250 ml/kg (3.5 oz/lb) during the first 24 hours of life. For example, an 8 lb lamb should receive 6oz in the first 2 hours and 28 oz over the first 24 hours of life.

If a ewe does not have adequate amounts of colostrum, colostrum from another ewe may be used. If ewe colostrum is not available, goat or cow colostrum can be used. There is a chance for disease transmission to occur using goat or cow colostrum, eg. Johnes Disease, so investigation into the health status of the herd is important. Likewise, in rare cases some lambs fed cow colostrum may develop a
hemolytic anemia. Commercial colostrum substitutes are available but their efficacy is not known.

Lambs should be placed in a claiming pen or lambing jug. This allows for proper bonding to occur as well as gives the shepherd an opportunity to observe the ewe and lambs for problems. Lambs should remain there a minimum of one day plus a day for every lamb. Ewes may ignore weak lambs or lambs born subsequent to the first of a litter, so even though the lambs are with the ewe, one must observe ewe lamb interactions.

The lamb’s navel/umbilical cord should be dipped in a disinfectant. A 2% iodine, betadine, solution can be used as well as chlorohexidine. Chlorohexidine has been shown to provide some residual bacterial inhibition. Although tincture of iodine is commonly used, it may be too strong as it can cause burning of the tissues.

Lambs may need selenium supplementation if ewes are not properly supplemented. Feeding a quality trace mineral salt with the highest allowable selenium should provide the ewe and her lambs adequate selenium. If supplementation is given, lambs should receive 1/3 ml of BoSe.

Heat lamps may provide lambs needed warmth if the lambs are wet or sick. Lamps should be no closer than 4 feet from the ground. Positioning of the lamp is important as a misplaced lamp may set the barn on fire.

Fostering of lambs may be necessary in the case of triplets or inadequate milk production. Match lambs for size, color, and age. The closer to birth fostering occurs, the better the results. Placing fetal fluids on the adopted lamb may help the fostering process.

Colostrum should be hand fed before fostering to insure adequate passive transfer of immunoglobulins. When selecting the lamb to foster, pick the strongest of the lambs. Remove the ewe’s lambs and return them after she accepts the new lamb. Do not separate the ewe from her lambs any longer then 2 –3 hours.

Bottle feeding may be necessary if fostering is not an option. Provide the lamb colostrum during the first 24 hours of life. A lamb milk replacer should be used. Lambs should be fed 4 times a day. The lamb should receive a total of 20% of its body weight a day. For example, a 10 lb lamb would receive 2 lbs of milk (2 pints) a day, 8 oz per feeding. The milk should be fed warm in order to avoid chilling of the lamb during the first week of life. If bloating is a problem, either try feeding cold milk replacer or feed smaller quantities at a time more frequently. The second week of life, lambs can be fed 3 times a day rather than 4. Lambs should be offered creep feed within a week of life and can be weaned when they weigh 20 lbs. More information is available at http://www.sheepandgoat.com/articles/artificialfeeding.html.
Lambing Equipment Box
Bucket
Mild soap, Ivory
Towels
Obstetrical lubrication, KY Jelly, J-Lube
Obstetrical sleeves
Clean baling twine
Antiseptic to dip navels
Hair clips to use on umbilicus in case of hemorrhage.
Bottle nipples
Feeding tube
60 cc syringe to fit feeding tube