



The Process of Lambing

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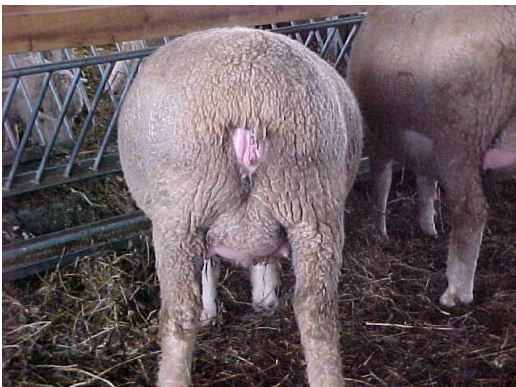
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Watching the birth of lambs is one of the most rewarding things about raising sheep. Understanding the process of what is happening can help you to determine when the birth is likely to occur and can help you decide when a ewe needs assistance. This fact sheet provides an overview of the lambing process as well as signs that lambing will soon occur.



Last Month of Pregnancy

During the last month of pregnancy the ewe will need more energy to keep up with the demands of the lambs growing inside of her. During this time, her belly will grow and her udder will begin to produce colostrum, the first milk. You may also notice that the ewe has more difficulty getting up and moving around due to the weight of her pregnancy.



Last Week of Pregnancy

During the last week of pregnancy the ewe's body begins to prepare for lambing. A few days before she goes into labor, her vulva will begin to change from light pink to a dark pink color. The vulva will also begin to swell. The udder is full of colostrum and will feel tight and hard. The last change you will notice is a relaxation of the muscles in the hip area.



The Onset of Labor

At the start of labor, the ewe will become unsocial and restless. She will move away from the main part of the flock and will spend extra time getting up and laying down. Her vulva will be very swollen and will appear very relaxed. If it is feeding time, the ewe will be reluctant to eat with the rest of the flock. Take time each feeding to watch your ewes for signs of abnormal behavior. This is your first clue to check the flock more often for anyone who is lambing.

As the onset of labor gets closer, you will notice her starting to dig a nest in the bedding. As the labor progresses, the ewe will intermittently stand up and lay down. She may also turn circles while bleating. The first sign that the lambs are coming is the appearance of the water bag. The bag will be filled with a clear fluid. Once the water bag breaks, the lambs should be born within 30 minutes. It is also normal for the ewe to lick the bedding where the water has broken. If you find that the ewe is not progressing with the labor, you may want to check to make sure that the lambs are positioned correctly for the birth.

The appearance of the water bag shows that lambing is progressing. The clear fluid-filled bag is the sack around the lamb that is about to be born.

The Birth Process

Once the water breaks you should soon see the appearance of the front feet. The lamb's head should lay above and between the front legs in a normal presentation. The feet should also be pointing downward in a normal presentation. Feet that are pointing upward are generally from a breech birth. Lambs can be born in the breech position, but you will want to be sure to have the birth progress rapidly. As soon as a breech-positioned lamb is born, hold him up by his back legs and rub down his sides to help remove any fluid from his lungs.



This ewe has already given birth to her first lamb and is ready to give birth to another lamb. Note the feet have appeared outside the birth canal. A closer inspection in the picture at the right shows that the feet are positioned correctly and are pointing downward.



The next step in the birth process is the appearance of the head. Most of the time a thin membrane will still cover the lamb. This membrane should break as the lamb is born. However, you may want to be nearby in the event that the lamb needs assistance. If the birth is progressing, allow nature to take its course. Only assist if necessary.

Remember that a young ewe who is giving birth to her first lambs will take more time to complete the birth process than an older, more experienced ewe.



Shortly after the feet appear, the head should appear above and between the front legs.



As more of the lamb appears outside of the ewe, allow the ewe to continue pushing until the lamb is completely born. When the ewe stands up, the umbilical cord will break on its own. Do not cut the cord as this is likely to cause excessive bleeding. Allow the cord to tear on its own.

Allow the ewe to push the lamb out on her own. Also, be sure to let the umbilical cord tear on its own.

Once the lamb is born, check to make sure that it is breathing. Wipe the head and nose off well to make it easier for the lamb to breathe. If the lamb is not breathing, try inserting a piece of straw a short way into a nostril to encourage the lamb to sneeze. You may also need to lift the lamb up by the rear legs and vigorously rub its sides.

In cold weather it is also a good idea to dry off the ears and tail as best as possible. This helps to prevent freezing. Allow the mother to lick the lamb to clean off the rest. She should be "talking" to her lamb now that he is born.



Use a towel to dry off the lamb's head and nose. This will help him to breathe easier.



Allow the ewe to lick her lamb. This helps clean off the lamb as well as helps the mother to identify her offspring.

If the mother is still lying down, move the lamb toward her head so that she can lick off the lamb. This is a bonding process for the mother and lamb to identify each other. They will need to be able to identify each other once they are turned out with a group of ewes and lambs.

Do not move the mother and her new lamb into a lambing pen until she has given birth to all her lambs. A ewe that is forced to lamb inside the smaller sized lambing pen runs a higher risk of laying down on the first lamb that was born while she is giving birth to the second lamb.

Lambs who are born outdoors on pasture don't have to be brought inside to a lambing pen. Use your best judgement based on how well the ewe is caring for her newborns.

A vigorous lamb will soon be trying to stand up. For weaker lambs, they may need a few minutes longer (sometimes up to an hour) before they are ready to stand up to nurse. You may want to give any weaker lambs a dose of a high energy/vitamin and mineral drench to provide extra energy until they are able to nurse on their own.

Once the ewe has finished giving birth to all of her lambs, she can be moved into a smaller lambing pen for several days. This gives her additional time to bond with her lambs and allows you to keep a closer watch on the lambs to make sure they are getting enough milk to drink.



A vigorous lamb will soon begin trying to stand.



Your last tasks once mother and lambs are in the lambing pen are to check her teats to make sure they are open and to check that the mother has milk. Another task is to dip the lamb's navel in iodine to prevent any navel infections.

Check the ewe's teats to make sure they are open and to make sure the ewe has milk.



Dip the lamb's navel in iodine to prevent a navel infection.

The process of lambing is an exciting part of nature. It doesn't take any time at all until the barn is full of a group of happy, healthy lambs. Understanding this process will help you to determine when a ewe will lamb and will hopefully allow you to spend more time sleeping at night and less time getting up in the middle of the night to check on the ewes!

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