

SHEEP HEALTH

Fact Sheet . . . No. 7



DYSTOCIA (Lambing Problems)

Dystocia, or difficult birth, is common in sheep and causes the death of many lambs and ewes. Yearling ewes and ewe lambs are much more susceptible to lambing problems than mature ewes that have lambed previously. Obesity and lack of exercise during late pregnancy contribute to the incidence and severity of dystocia in sheep.

Ability to recognize lambing difficulty is as important as technique in relieving dystocia. A common error of the inexperienced shepherd is to intervene too early in the lambing process. A vaginal examination of lambing ewes should not be performed unless necessary because it increases the risk of infection of the female tract after lambing. A good general rule is to not intervene as long as a ewe is making progress. When a ewe has been in full labor for 30 to 40 minutes with no progress, examine it to determine if the lamb is positioned correctly. Never try to force the cervix open because it often leads to hemorrhage, shock, and infection.

There are few hard and fast rules about handling dystocia. Gradually developing expertise through experience is the best way to learn. Beyond simple assistance, the novice should call a veterinarian when in doubt about proper procedures. Many lambs and ewes die because of prolonged manipulation of lambs in the birth canal and use of excessive force when delivering lambs. Never try to forcibly extract a lamb that is in an abnormal position. The position of the lamb must be corrected before attempting delivery. Excessive force can result in shock, hemorrhage, post-lambing infection, fertility problems, and prolapse of the birth canal.

Assisting Delivery

It is usually best to position the ewe on one side on a clean piece of plastic or canvas to avoid contamination of the birth canal with bedding. Assisting the ewe in a standing position is also acceptable, but be ready for the ewe to lie down immediately when force is applied to the lamb.

If an examination is necessary, clip excess and dirty wool from the area adjacent to the birth canal and then scrub this area thoroughly with soap and water. Rescrub whenever the ewe contaminates the area with feces. Carefully scrub your hand and arm with soap and water and apply a mild antiseptic. Many veterinarians then use a plastic or rubber sleeve. Next apply liberal amounts of lubricant jelly to the hand and arm. **This is critical.** It is almost impossible to use too much lubricant. Ewes that have been in labor for a long period often have a dry birth canal. Failure to properly lubricate the birth canal results in trauma to the tissues, a very difficult birth, and infection after delivery. It is often advisable to put mineral oil or lubricant jelly in the birth canal and even in the uterus before manipulating the lamb.

The normal birth position is head first with the head between the forelegs (*figure 1*). With multiple births, it is common to have the legs of one lamb and the head of another entering the opening of the birth canal at the same time. If forelegs and a head are present in the birth canal, gently pull on the legs to make sure that they are from the same lamb as the head. If the legs and head do not belong to the same lamb, take



Figure 1. Normal presentation.

plenty of time to repel the head if necessary and follow the legs up to the body. If the problem is simultaneous delivery of twins, repel one back into the uterus while holding the other. This is accomplished by putting a lamb saver snare over the head of the lamb nearest the birth canal and holding it toward the rear of the ewe while repelling the other lamb. Do this carefully and gently, using lots of lubricant.

Anterior presentation (head first) with the lamb's head turned backward (*figure 2*) is another common cause of dystocia. Repel the lamb, place a snare over the head, bring the forelegs into the birth canal, and begin steady traction on the lamb after thoroughly lubricating the birth canal. Use judgment and common sense on the amount of traction applied to the lamb. Once the head and forelegs are through the birth canal, apply traction as much in a downward as an outward direction because the birth canal is arc shaped. Pulling straight back forces the lamb into the top of the birth canal.

Lambs can be born quite easily in the posterior presentation where the rear of the lamb is presented toward the birth canal. Bring both rear legs into the birth canal, lubricate, and pull steadily. A breech presentation is the rear of the lamb presented to the birth canal with both rear legs forward (*figure 3*). Repel the lamb forward, grasp one rear leg, and bring it into the birth canal. Follow with the other leg. Use extreme care because the toes of the rear leg can easily penetrate the wall of the uterus during this procedure. When in doubt, call a veterinarian.

One of the most serious and, unfortunately, fairly common problems is a ewe that has been in labor a long time with a dead, swollen, retained lamb. The birth canal is dry, swollen, and the ewe may be quite sick. Seek professional attention because the life of the ewe is threatened. After delivery of the dead lamb, treat the ewe rigorously for infection and toxemia.

Occasionally, delivery through the birth canal is impossible, usually because of an excessively large lamb. A Caesarian section can be quickly and easily performed in such situations. A veterinarian should make this decision. The prognosis for both the ewe and lamb(s) is much better by avoiding prolonged attempts at delivery through the birth canal. When in doubt, get professional help.

Other Lambing Problems

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Figure 2. Head turned backward.



Figure 3. Breech presentation.

Several other problems can occur at or near lambing time. Vaginal prolapse prior to lambing is common and may occur in large numbers in a flock. If this is a problem, a veterinarian should evaluate rations, housing, exercise, and general management.

Failure of the cervix to dilate, especially in ewe lambs, is a problem in some flocks. Its cause is not fully known. Selenium deficiency is known to be one contributing factor to this problem, but there are many others. Seek professional assistance.

Use drugs and hormones, such as oxytocin, only under the guidance of a veterinarian. Purchase of such prescription drugs without the order of a veterinarian is a violation of the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act. Under a veterinarian-client-patient relationship, such drugs can be very valuable in the handling of obstetrical and lactation problems of ewes, but misuse is dangerous.

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