



BABY LAMB SURVIVAL

J. L. Goelz, D.V.M.

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Without a doubt the first three weeks are the most critical in a lamb's life. If the lamb consumes enough colostrum and is off to a good start his performance will be good. On the other hand we have all witnessed lambs that were chilled when born or had severe scours and just didn't start life on the right foot. These lambs can be picked out of a group months later. They fail to thrive and simply don't grow or perform as well. As shepherds we have more opportunity to influence the number of lambs sold /ewe and the overall profitability of the sheep flock during the first three weeks than any other time in the lamb's life.

Maximizing lamb survival requires a plan. First we need to have the ewe in the correct body condition score and on a correct nutrition and mineral program. Additionally, we need to have an effective abortion control program in place. If we have accomplished these goals we will have a healthy ewe that is in position to lamb with minimal help and lactate well. This is sound prevention for lambing time problems. Secondly, we need to be prepared for lambing. The shepherd should have supplies purchased, lambing pens arranged and ewes shorn before the first lamb hits the ground.

If we want to minimize baby lamb mortality let us look first at the causes of baby lamb mortality. A study at the U.S. Sheep Experiment Station showed that 46% of lamb mortality was caused by scours, 20% by starvation and 8% by pneumonia. Individual variation occurs between farms but our experience suggests that these three categories are most important to control.

There are many inherent factors that predispose lambs to mortality. A lamb is born from a sterile environment in the uterus that is 101 degrees into an environment that is cold and often loaded with bacteria. The lambs internal thermoregulatory mechanism isn't fully functional until it is three days old. It has limited body energy reserves (brown fat). Also the lamb is born antibody deficient and has a compromised immune system until it suckles colostrum. Taking these inherent factors into consideration the third step to our plan is to provide an environment that is warm and dry. Good sanitation practices will decrease the bacteria load in the environment.

After the lamb is born we need to ensure adequate colostrum intake. In addition to providing the lamb with antibodies that will protect it from disease, colostrum has high energy density that provides the lamb the energy to get up and nurse. Lambs require 90cc (3oz) per pound of body weight. This should be consumed in the first 18-24 hours of life. From a practical standpoint we need to identify lambs that haven't suckled colostrum and feed them colostrum by a stomach tube (6 oz/feeding). If we catch these lambs early they will be up and suckling the rest of their colostrum requirement on their own.

Next we need to identify starvation/hypothermia lambs. These are lambs that are not consuming enough milk and therefore do not have enough energy to suckle and do not have enough energy to keep warm. Starvation/hypothermia lambs may be unable to rise, have a gaunt, bony appearance and will be weak. These lambs need to be fed with a stomach tube until they are strong enough to suckle on their own. If the lamb is in a cold environment placing it in a warming box will speed recovery.

By now we should have the lambs off to a good start. For the remainder of the next three weeks we must minimize death loss to scours and pneumonia. This means early detection and effective treatment. Scouring lambs will be gaunt, depressed and have wet rear legs. These lambs should be treated with oral antibiotics such as spectinomycin orally and electrolytes if they are dehydrated. Dehydration can be determined by pulling on a pinch of skin. Sheep that have normal hydration will have elastic skin that quickly returns to normal. Dehydrated sheep lose their skin elasticity and the skin will stay "tented" for two or more seconds. If the lambs are dehydrated oral electrolytes should be given by stomach tube.

Lambs with pneumonia will be depressed with drooped ears and often will be in a corner by themselves. Their breathing will be shallow and quick and often they will appear painful. These lambs will have an elevated rectal temperature (above 103). Treatment with LA-200, Naxcel/Excenel, Micotil or Nuflor is very effective. Checking young lambs at least twice daily is recommended so the shepherd can treat sick lambs early in the course of disease.