



UDDER MANAGEMENT

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Management of the ewes' udder can sometimes be a complex situation. A post-parturient ewe without a functional udder represents an unprofitable situation. I will try to cover several areas that are of concern in udder management that I will attempt to discuss in detail.

First, one must understand the anatomy of the udder and its function. The udder is a secretory gland that derives its nutritional supply from a very generous blood supply and is controlled by a complex hormone system. In the sheep much of the time it is inactive and nonfunctional. When ewe approaches lambing the blood supply increases, the gland enlarges and becomes functional. As the lactation process diminishes the reverse is true. In treatment and diagnosis of udder disease and abnormalities one must understand normal udder anatomy and function.

Udder management during the dry period should consist of palpation of the udder. A normal nonfunctional udder will be soft and pliable and sometimes almost nonexistent. Palpation may reveal hard spots of various sizes and involvement. These spots indicate abscesses and induration of the udder that generally do not respond to treatment and depending on their size, seriously reduce or eliminate udder function. Some udders will remain pendulant even when dry and if they are free of hard areas they generally are functional. This is a good time to remove troublesome extra teats. They can be removed by simply snipping them off with a sharp scissors. Teats may also be palpated for cores which indicate the teat would not function even if the udder is sound. Very little can be done during this period other than removing the extra teats. Occasionally abscesses may be opened but generally culling should be considered because generally the lambs born from these ewes will become lamb bar candidates.

Management at lambing time is an important factor in prolonging the life of the udder. Ewes that are heavy milkers or have single lambs should be fed less grain, particularly the first week or ten days after lambing. It is extremely important to milk out extra milk in large udders until the lamb or lambs can keep up with it. Stretching and enlarging of teats is a result of pressure building up in the udder. Sometimes the teats need to be milked out so the lambs may nurse. Occasionally prior to lambing the udder will become swollen and edematous, fluid in the tissues. This may be treated with Naquasone boluses or injectable diuretics.

Mastitis, simply defined, is an inflammation of the udder and is of concern because mastitis limits or severely restricts the productive life of the ewe. Many types of mastitis occur, but little research has been done. Sometimes it is chronic with just induration and reduced milk supply; this type, generally caused by strep bacteria, needs research and is poorly understood. The more acute type will be discussed here.

Acute ovine mastitis is characterized by cessation of appetite, depression, swollen inflamed udder, usually one-sided, and lameness of a rear leg or legs. Prompt treatment is very essential if there is to be any hope of salvaging the udder. Quite often the best that can be hoped for is the life of the ewe and salvage of the uninfected side. Immediate injection of broad spectrum antibiotics is essential and occasionally one injection of dexamethasone to stimulate appetite is necessary. Three or four day treatment is generally necessary. The udder should be infused with lactating cow antibiotic mastitis tube. Weaning the lambs is an important consideration in udder management. How effective reducing water and feed intake at weaning time, in reducing mastitis, is dependent on several variables. The most drastic method consists of withholding water for 24 hours prior to weaning and 24 hours afterward plus reducing protein level and feed consumption one week prior to weaning. Present recommendations do not include withholding water but do include reducing feed consumption, grass hay only, the last week prior to weaning. Ewes that have a history of mastitis that has been successfully treated should be infused with dry cow tubes at weaning time. Some producers use Albon in the drinking water prior to weaning, with some success.

The condition of the ewes also must be considered. Thin ewes, older ewes and poor milking ewes need not be subjected to restricted nutrition. Also it takes the presence of mastitis bacteria to cause mastitis. A tight udder of milk alone is not serious other than the fact that it may cause structural damage to the udder by enlarging teats and breaking down suspensory attachments.

It should be remembered that allowing lambs to nurse too long is hard on udders; 5 to 8 weeks is ideal - over 10 weeks is too long.