



SPRAINS, BRUISES, AND BROKEN LEGS

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Despite our efforts to provide a safe environment for sheep injuries occur. The flock instinct and jumping habit of some sheep coupled with overanxious mothering or just plain bad luck result in bumps, bruises, strains and broken legs. Many of these are easily treated, some cannot be treated and some will heal on their own. In the next few paragraphs I will try to explain the difference along with some suggestions on effective treatment.

Broken legs: These are generally the most obvious of injuries. To put it bluntly the leg is bending where it isn't supposed to bend. To confirm a broken leg hold the joint above and below the suspected break and try to wiggle it. The prognosis for broken legs depends on the location, the age of the sheep and the severity. Let's start with severity. If the bone has not penetrated through the skin the fracture can usually be successfully cast or splinted and the prognosis for recovery is good. If the bone is showing through the skin and it is contaminated with dirt, mud or manure you need to either think about butchering immediately or euthanasia. Contaminated bones do not heal and to treat bone infections you are looking at antibiotic therapy for weeks to months. In the case of lambs amputation may be an option but three legged lambs will have a severely docked carcass as the muscle development is not uniform. Three legged lambs can work for freezer lambs but the cost of processing may not justify the entire process and euthanasia is probably the best answer. If the fracture is below the knee or the hock casting or splinting generally is successful. On baby lambs I like to splint the legs as the splint can be removed in two weeks and reapplied to allow growth. Generally 3 weeks in a splint and the lamb will be healed. I will usually cast older lambs or ewes with fractures because the casting material is more durable than the splint. When casting or splinting you must immobilize the joint above and below the fracture. If you don't the splint or cast will act like a pendulum and make the fracture worse. Because you cannot immobilize the stifle or the elbow casting or splinting only works if the fracture is below the hock or the knee. If the fracture is above the knee or hock I usually fold the leg and wrap it up to the body with vetwrap. This will immobilize the leg until it heals. The lamb will have to survive on three legs. While this works well the lamb will often hold that leg up even after the leg is healed and the wrap is removed. This is because the lamb is accustomed to living without it. It will take 3-4 weeks for the lamb to use that leg but eventually it will start using it more and more. In ewes fractures above the knee and hock are unfixable and euthanasia is pretty much the only option.

Splinting is an easy procedure and most shepherds can do this at home. Splints that we and other veterinary clinics carry are usually light and made out of plastic. I also have seen homemade splints made out of lath or 1/3 diameter PVC pipe. The PVC pipe ones are my favorite because you can heat them and bend them how you want them. Of course the pre-made ones are cheap enough that it probably isn't worth your time making your own unless you need to. Have the splint long enough to immobilize the bone above and below the fracture, pad the skin with some roll cotton or cloth, apply the splint and wrap with vetwrap. The splint should be snug and tight but not impair circulation. Leave the toes exposed to the air so you can be sure they aren't swelling. Never wrap the entire foot or you will have footrot or foot scald. I usually give Penicillin and banamine (flunixin) for a few days and lambs with splints. After two or three days the lambs are generally moving well on all four legs. Baby lambs need only to have the leg splinted for 2-3 weeks. Ewes will need the leg immobilized for 4-6 weeks. Always have the splinted sheep in a well bedded pen. If moisture wicks up inside the splint it will make a smelly mess rapidly. Keep it dry.

Casting is a little more involved and probably will need a Veterinarian. If you have lots of broken legs have your Veterinarian show you how to cast or splint. Most will be happy to help you.

Strains and Bruises: So what do you do if the leg is not broken? Most of these are muscle strains or pulled ligaments. If the joints are not bending correctly (such as lambs that knuckle over on their pasterns) splinting may still be a good idea. If everything is bending normally but the sheep is lame you are looking at a bruise or muscle strain. What is the difference? A bruise is a broken blood vessel usually from trauma that bleeds into the muscle. A sprain is inflammation within a muscle. Both are painful and often are warm to the touch. Honestly because we cannot see discoloration in the skin in sheep we really don't know if it is a strain or a bruise but we treat them the same. Banamine (flunixin) for pain relief, penicillin to prevent infection in the case of a bruise and time. Strains and bruises will cause lameness for a few days but in a week the sheep will be back to normal.