

Small Ruminant Newsletter

RAISING HEALTHY LAMBS

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Lambing is harvest time for shepherds. Lambs require special care to ensure that they grow and thrive. The following factors contribute to survival and optimal growth of lambs:



1. Adequate nutrition and body condition of ewes before lambing: Ewes lambing in body condition score of 4 out of 5 will milk well and be able to provide nutrition for 2 or 3 lambs.

2. Treatment of lambs at birth with vitamin E and Selenium: These act as antioxidants in muscle tissue and are essential to prevent nutritional muscular dystrophy, otherwise known as White Muscle Disease. Selenium also contributes to the function of white blood cells, and therefore to disease resistance. Selenium does not

cross the placenta in ewes, so lambs are born deficient in this element; Vitamin E deteriorates in stored feeds over the winter, so ewes are frequently deficient by the time of lambing. Ontario soils are generally lacking in Selenium, so home-grown feeds are also deficient. Injection of lambs at birth is the only reliable way to ensure adequate levels of vitamin E and Selenium.

3. Vaccination against Clostridial diseases: The most important diseases in this family are Tetanus and Pulpy Kidney Disease (Enterotoxaemia Type D). Clostridial bacteria are found in soil and in the digestive tract. Sheep are very sensitive to developing tetanus, far more so than are cattle or humans. Tetanus spores can enter around elastrator rings or other wounds. Pulpy Kidney disease usually occurs in fast-growing lambs receiving good nutrition, especially creep feed or finishing rations. Vaccination of ewes prior to lambing provides protective antibodies that lambs absorb in colostrum. In cases where ewes were not vaccinated, lambs can be vaccinated within a few days of birth. Lambs should be re-vaccinated at 3 months of age (or vaccinated for the first time if the ewes were vaccinated) and receive a booster 6 weeks later.



4. Clean, dry bedding: While ewes often bed pens themselves with wasted hay, additional clean, dry bedding is necessary at lambing time to prevent environmental infections from the bedding pack such as navel ill, scours, and mastitis. Even in cold weather, lambs will keep themselves warm if they have a dry, deeply-bedded place to lie down. Chilled lambs are much more susceptible to infectious disease than those that stay warm and dry.

5. **Ventilation:** Confinement of ewes at lambing allows lambs to breathe air that is filled with bacteria and viruses breathed out by the older members of the flock. Ewes have had opportunity to develop immunity to the pathogens that live in the flock. Lambs, on the other hand, are born with inexperienced immune systems and acquire immunity only from colostrum. Passive immunity from colostrum begins to decline around 3 to 4 weeks of age, at a time when their own active immunity has not yet reached its full effectiveness.

This is the time when lambs are most susceptible to developing pneumonia, and the best prevention is good ventilation - in addition to clean, dry bedding.

6. **Avoid overcrowding:** A high stocking density increases the number of pathogens to which lambs are exposed in the air they breathe and on surfaces. Crowding is also a stress that reduces a lamb's resistance to disease.

Our veterinarians are happy to discuss the needs of your flock and to assist you with any problems you may be having.

Please give us a ring!

