

Management of Ewes and Lambs at Weaning

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Weaning time is a crucial period in the management of ewes and lambs. The separation can be stressful for both lambs and the ewe. Management goals should be to keep this stress as low as possible, thereby reducing incidence of disease and health problems in ewes and lambs and allowing the lambs to grow at a normal rate.

When to Wean

Time of weaning is specific to each producers' circumstances and type of production system. Weaning time for extensive type of production systems on a forage based program, may be at four to five months of age. While in intensive systems, lambs are commonly weaned at an early age.

Midwestern producers are usually involved in an intensive type of production system, and thus, wean at early ages. Lambs should be a minimum of 50 to 60 days of age or 40 to 45 pounds before weaning.

Ewes' peak milk production occurs from three to four weeks of lactation. After this period milk production will decrease, regardless of other factors. Therefore, in intensive systems, where inputs are high and pasture availability may be limited, it is usually a good practice to wean around 60 days of age.

However, if pasture is abundant, internal parasites are not a problem and the lambs are creep fed, no harm is done by leaving the lambs on the ewes for more than 60 to 70 days. Actually, if the above conditions are met, waiting later to wean can be less stressful on the ewes and lambs.

Management of Ewes

The overriding concern at weaning time for ewes is to avoid mastitis problems. Ewes with spoiled udders have decreased, or no production potential in future years and little salvage value.

Therefore, in an early weaning program, it is crucial to prevent mastitis. The easiest way to prevent mastitis is to decrease or halt milk production in the ewe. This is accomplished by lowering the crude protein and energy content of the diet, and sometimes water intake by the ewe.

Grain feeding to lactating ewes should be reduced from about 7 to 14 days before weaning day. For the last five to seven days before weaning, no grain should be fed to the ewes. Average to good quality hay can be fed up to three to four days before weaning. For the last few days the lambs are suckling, ewes should be fed a low protein grass hay or straw.

Some producers remove water from the ewes at weaning. However, if the energy and protein intake of the ewes is reduced, removing water is probably ineffective. Also, removing water from the ewes' diet in hot weather can be dangerous.

Leave the ewes in drylot on the low-quality hay or straw until their udders have started to dry up and recede. This can take from four to seven days. Do not turn ewes onto pasture immediately after removing them from the lambs. Drylot them until they are sufficiently dry. Spring grass is high in protein, water, digestibility and other nutrients crucial to milk production. Spring grazing is nature's way of making milk for the newborns. Turning ewes onto pasture before they are ready is a sure way to lose udders.

Ewes need to be watched closely during the weaning period for mastitis. Strutted, red, hot, hard udders are signs of mastitis. Lumpy milk with blood secretions are mastitis symptoms. Ewes that limp or walk gingerly on their rear legs may have sore udders.

If some ewes have strutted udders with excess milk, they can be hand milked until their udder becomes soft and pliable. Completely milking out the ewes just stimulates them to produce more milk. This can be a problem with turning the lambs back in to empty the udders.

If mastitis is suspicioned in a ewe, prompt action is crucial. Mastitis can be controlled through veterinary assistance in prescribing the correct types and amounts of antibiotics.

Management of Lambs

Generally, weaning time is more stressful for lambs than ewes. Also, their immune system is not as developed and they are more susceptible to disease. The sudden separation from the ewe cuts off their protection and part of their food supply. Keeping stress low during weaning is crucial to their future performance.

Lambs should be consuming adequate amounts of a good quality creep feed. This should be a creep feed containing at least 14% crude protein, with a sufficient energy content, correct mineral balance, and it should be palatable. Lambs should be consuming at least one pound per head per day and this could be more, depending on breed, age and size. If lambs are in drylot, they should have access to a good quality hay. Do not drastically change a lamb's ration for two weeks before or two weeks after weaning.

Management practices such as vaccination, castration, worming, tagging, etc. should be done sufficiently before or after weaning day to avoid putting extra stress on the lambs. If lambs have been on pasture with their mothers, they should be treated for internal parasites before or after weaning. Furthermore, before weaning lambs should have been vaccinated against overeating (type C and D).

When weaning, it is important to remove the ewes from the lambs and not vice versa. Separating the lambs from their mothers is stressful enough, without them having to get use to a strange place. Anything one can do to keep stress on the lambs to a minimum will help make the weaning process more successful. Keeping lambs in familiar surroundings helps make weaning less stressful.

Lambs should be watched closely for health problems. Be aware of their feed intake and activity. Healthy lambs will stretch and shake off after rising. Pneumonia, scours, coccidia, urinary calculi can be potential problems at weaning time. If there is a particular health problem, prompt action will go a long way in curing it. Consultation with a veterinarian should be done to effectively deal with health problems.

Summary

Keeping stress to a minimum at weaning time is important for the health and performance of the ewe and lambs. Ewes should be dried up in their milk supply before turning onto pasture to prevent mastitis. Management practices and rations for the lambs should not be severely changed around weaning time. Lambs should be left in familiar surroundings during the weaning process. Closely observe ewes and lambs for health problems during weaning, and if problems arise, act promptly with veterinary assistance.