

Dealing with Difficult Births at Lambing

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by Mike Neary
Extension Sheep Specialist
Purdue University

The arrival of new lambs or any other newborn is always a miracle. Not just the miracle of life, but the miracle that overwhelming things turn out fine. It is always amazing to me that of all the possibilities of things turning out wrong, they usually turn out normal. Keep this in mind as you read this article, that normal births by ewes are the rule rather than the exception. An attempt will be made to discuss the most common lambing problems and offer some hints and help in dealing with them.

As the time of lambing for a ewe approaches, behavioral changes occur. Ewes may engage in nesting behavior, separating themselves from the flock, muscle relaxation may occur, the ewe may "drop", raise her tail, grind her teeth, may actually start straining a bit, and just overall act nervous and uncomfortable. When ewes start acting like this, the impending birth is close (2-15 hours). Ewes are best left undisturbed during this phase of the birthing process. They can be observed, but disruptions should be kept to a minimum or eliminated.

As labor becomes more intense and progresses, normally a ewe will pass her bag of water. This can be observed quite readily and gives one a definite sequence for time of lambing. Ideally, a ewe will deliver a lamb 30 to 60 minutes after the appearance of a water bag.

Presentation of the water bag is followed by the birth of the ewe's lamb(s). This can take a variable amount of time, but probably should not take more than a couple hours for a ewe with twins.

After lambing, the ewe will clean or shed her afterbirth. Ideally, this will be within a few hours, but sometimes may take a day. If a couple days go by and a ewe has not cleaned, she may need some attention.

When Do Ewes Need Help?

Ewes need help when things are not going well. The most common lambing problem is a malpresentation. A normal delivery will consist of a labor sequence that consists of straining and pushing, cervical dilation, presentation of the waterbag and the eventual birth.

A normal presentation of the lamb consists of the head and both front legs coming through the pelvis and birth canal first. The front legs will be just below and slightly to the side of the head. The crown of the head will be reasonably lined up with the ewe's spine as delivery is made. If you are observing a ewe with a normal frontwards presentation, the first view of the lamb will be the nose and front hooves.

Ewes may need assistance when they do not make significant birthing progress 40 to 60 minutes after the water bag appears. This is a good indication that there may be a malpresentation or a mismatch between the lamb size and the ewe's pelvic size.

When the decision is made to assist a ewe lambing, some important tasks need to occur. Producers should try to keep things as clean as possible before entering a ewe. A good disinfectant and lubricant should be used on the ewe and the hand or arm (preferably a protective sleeve will be used) of the person. Washing before applying a lubricant is helpful. Protective sleeves or surgical type gloves should be used for the person and animal's protection. Women of child bearing age should be especially cautious when assisting a ewe lamb. There are a number of abortive type diseases that can be picked up by women from sheep. Hygiene and lubrication only make good sense for people and sheep.

When assisting ewes lamb it takes: patience, perseverance and gentleness. Rushing the job won't work and actually can lead to further complications and even permanent injury to ewes. When lambs need pulled, steady, gentle, but firm pressure works best.

To successfully pull lambs, one needs to be able to visualize lamb parts and positions by touch. This takes a limited knowledge of anatomy and a bit of concentration.

When entering a ewe to check the situation, the first thing that needs to be determined is if her cervix is dilated. One needs to be careful not to tear the cervix when pulling lambs or checking ewes. If the cervix is not fully dilated, but is soft, giving the ewe some time to dilate is probably the prudent course of action. Failure to dilate for an extended period of time with hard labor and the presence of a water bag probably needs veterinarian assistance and possibly a cesarean section.

Supplies should be handy that can assist in pulling lambs. Lubricant, a lamb snare or other device to stabilize lamb body parts, restraining device for ewes, antibiotics for the ewe, a towel or sacking for the lambs and the shepherd, etc.

Malpresentations of Lambs

Tight Birth. This can be caused by a large lamb, a small ewe, a small pelvis or any combination of the three. This is probably the most common delivery problem in sheep. It is most common among young ewes or flocks that have a preponderance of singles. Presentation of the lamb can be normal and birthing is still not progressing. Often the lamb is in the birth canal and may be partially presented. Firm pressure is often all that is needed to remove the lamb. The best method of applying pressure is to grab a front leg below the knee and pulling it in a downward arc towards the ewe's hocks until it is extended. Take care that the head is coming and you may actually have to pull the skin over the lamb's head. Then pull the second leg into an extended position just like the first. From this point, steady, firm pressure may be all that is needed.

If the lamb is still not coming, steady arcing pressure towards the ewe's hocks should be continued with a slight swaying or rocking from side to side. If things are still not progressing, the ewe can be rolled onto her back and often this frees up a bit of space and the lamb can be delivered.

One Leg Back. This malpresentation is a reasonably common one. The head and one leg are coming normally, while one leg is not extended into the birth canal. If the ewe is roomy or the lamb is not large, often one can pull the lamb with the leg back. If this is not feasible, then the lamb's shoulders, leg and head should be pushed back and the turned back front leg should be "flipped" into the birth canal. Take care not to lose the lamb's head when doing this.

Head Only. This presentation entails the head only coming, with both front legs back. This can be a very serious situation. If the head is sticking out of the ewe it can swell and it is then difficult to push the head back to obtain one or more of the front legs. Prompt action is required to successfully deal with this type of delivery.

Front Legs Only. This can be one of the most frustrating malpresentations that occur. The head has to be brought into place before the lamb can be delivered. It takes patience and perseverance sometimes to locate the head. When located, be sure it is the head of the correct lamb and not its sibling. This type of presentation, it is often handy to have a lambing snare to hold either the front legs or head in place once you sort the situation out. This can be one of the most difficult malpresentations, especially if the lamb is large.

Rear Legs First. This is an easy situation to overcome. Simply pull the lamb backwards. However, one needs to be careful not to injure or break the lamb's ribs as it is being pulled. Also, often times when lambs come backwards, the ewe will not present a water bag.

Two Lambs Coming Together. This problem takes some sorting. One has to follow heads, feet and legs all the way back to the shoulder or source to be sure what lamb they belong to. This takes time, patience and a visualization process. Usually, they can be sorted out and the fact that it is more than one lamb can be in our favor, as the lambs are not usually large. Identify, the body parts of lamb, deal with it, and the next one is usually easier.

Other Considerations

Lambing problems can be due to genetics, health problems or nutritional status of ewes. Keep a few records. If one ram tends to throw big lambs, certainly do not breed him to young ewes and you may want to cull him. If certain ewes have problems at more than one lambing, they would be a prime candidate for a treatment of trailermycin.

When pulling lambs or entering ewes, be gentle. Also, ewes should be treated with antibiotics any time you enter them. Develop a working relationship with a veterinarian. When you need them, you really need them. Especially at lambing time.