

Lambing

Sheep have been lambing on their own for thousands of years, so mostly they can do it without help.

Normal lambing involves three stages. Stage one is when the cervix is dilating and the birth canal is preparing for the delivery. This may take 12 to 24 hours and over this time the ewe may seem unsettled and separate from the others.

As she enters second stage, uterine contractions will increase, and the ewe will spend time on her side straining. The “water bag” will appear and when it breaks the front feet will be seen and then the nose of the lamb between them.

The ewe will keep straining, but may stop for little breaks when she stands up, walks around for a minute or two, and then goes down again. The lamb will usually be delivered in less than an hour. If she is having multiple lambs, the same process is followed. Lambs coming backwards are no cause for concern, and as long as both hind legs are up in the birth canal, the ewe will have them with no problem. Definitely don't try and turn them.

Third stage labour follows, where the ewe stands and cleans the lambs, while they struggle to get to their feet. Post lambing contractions are taking place and the placenta is usually passed within an hour.

Dystocia (or difficult birth) is the most common cause of newborn lamb deaths and may require intervention by yourself or a veterinarian. Before you try and correct a dystocia, thoroughly wash your hands and arms with soapy water and also the back end of the ewe. If you have a lubricant use it copiously otherwise use soapy water or even margarine works.

Causes of dystocia.

*Tight birth. Either the lamb is too big or the ewe is too small. Requires plenty of lubricant and “walk” the lamb out pulling first on one leg and then the other. Keep the pull directed downwards towards the ewes back legs.

*Elbow lock. The forelimbs and head are all there, but the legs are flexed at the elbow. Push the lamb back, while pulling on the legs. You will feel the legs suddenly straighten and the lamb will free.

*Leg/s back. A small lamb with just one leg back may be delivered by pulling on the extended leg. If it is a large lamb or both legs are back, they need to be corrected. You may need to introduce your well lubricated arm into the birth canal up to you elbow to reach the hoof and cup it in your hand and bring forward. If the head is in the way, attach a rope to the hoof and pull the leg out while pushing the head back.

*Head back. Attach a rope to the legs and push them back inside the ewe, then with your hand, turn the head around and steer it into the birth canal. Take care not to pull on the bottom jaw as it is easy to fracture. A noose around the back of the head may help pull it into the birth canal. When it is there use the ropes to pull the limbs up too.

*Breech. A breech birth is when the lamb is coming tail first with the back legs tucked under its body. Often they go unnoticed because although the ewe may be straining, there is nothing showing. The hind legs need to be grasped with a cupped hand around the hooves and pulled forward and at the same time the body of the lamb may need to be pushed away from you. Once both limbs are out, the lamb is delivered backwards quite easily, although the lambs are very often dead because they have been left too long.

* Other problems include lambs deformed, swollen heads, dead and perhaps emphysematous, ewes that don't dilate their cervix and ewes that don't pass their placenta.

Don't hesitate to talk to your veterinarian about these or any problems. Often we can talk you through a lambing, but if you need assistance we can provide that.