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Animal Production FACTSHEET

Stomach Tubing Young Lambs

Introduction

Every sheep flock will have problems with lambs that are born weak. Though the causes of their weakness may be varied and/or unknown, it is important that they receive enough nutritional support to overcome this weakness so that they can regain their independence. This factsheet describes how to provide supportive nutrition for these animals through stomach tubing. A related factsheet titled "Hypothermia in Lambs" is also available.



Causes

The causes of weakness in lambs are numerous and can be genetic, infectious, nutritional and environmental. Genetic causes include prolonged birth (due to poor conformation of the ewe), low birth weight and poor mothering. Infectious include umbilical infections and to a lesser extent diarrhea and pneumonia (infectious problems usually start a bit later). Nutritional include poor feeding of the mother during pregnancy leading to low birth weight of the lamb or an insufficient milk supply in the ewe. Environmental include dampness, abandonment and cold temperatures.

These various causes can lead to a starved lamb with low body temperature (hypothermia). Stomach tubing in many cases can help reduce mortalities.

Equipment

A number of plastic tubes are available commercially however tubes can be easily made at home from soft, unused, flexible snowmobile gas lines. 3/8 " diameter line is best and should be at least partially made of rubber to keep it flexible when cold. A 60 cc plastic syringe is used to deliver the milk. The tube should be long enough to extend from the lamb's last rib to its mouth plus approximately another foot.

Milk

Ideally, the lamb should receive ewe colostrum at least for the first day. Cow colostrum can be collected prior to the lambing season and stored frozen in small quantities (250-500 mls). Defrost carefully, microwave defrosting is not recommended. All feeds should be warmed to body temperature before use.

Lambs require 50 mls/kg body weight per feeding, three times a day. For example, a small lamb might need 150 mls per feeding.



Milking Donor Ewes

Some farmers are skeptical about the volume of milk sheep can produce but this may be because they try to milk underfed ewes, up-ended between their

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legs, without the use of lubricants. A well-fed N. C. Cheviot ewe can produce up to 2 litres of milk per day.

To collect colostrum:

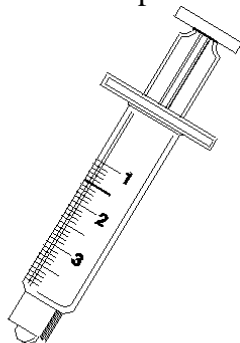
- Use well-fed ewes only.
- Keep ewe standing with her lamb by her head.
- Inject the ewe with 10-15 units of oxytocin intramuscularly (please note: 10-15 units does not mean 10-15 cc's, be sure to read the label to find out the right concentration).
- Lubricate teats (e.g. with K-Y jelly)
- Start milking 3 minutes after oxytocin injection.
- Milk into a mug and transfer to a container.
- Milk 3 times daily. One side only if she has a lamb at foot.

Technique for Stomach Tubing

Lay the tube alongside the lamb and measure from the last rib to the mouth. Make a mark on the tube at this point with a piece of tape or a marker pen.

Sit comfortably with the lamb on your lap. Put your thumb in the mouth, between the teeth, to pry the mouth open.

Insert the tube through the side of the mouth just behind the incisor teeth and feed it slowly into the mouth as the lamb swallows. Keep a finger in while the tube goes down to prevent the lamb from chewing it. Keep passing the tube until the mark on the tube is level with the mouth. (If the tube accidentally enters the trachea (windpipe), the lamb will struggle violently and you will only be able to pass the tube half way to your mark).



Attach a syringe full of milk to the tube and inject it over 10-15 seconds.

Until experienced, don't use this technique on lambs that are too weak to hold their heads up.

Substitutes for Ewe Colostrum

Colostrum can be stored frozen for 12 months. Goat colostrum is similar in composition to ewe colostrum and can be collected and frozen for use when available.

Cow colostrum may be used if ewe or goat colostrum is not available but:

- The amount should be increased by 30%.
- It should only be fed for the first one or two days as prolonged use may, in some cases, cause hemolytic disease.
- If cows used as donors are treated with clostridial vaccines, it will provide the lambs with protective antibodies against clostridial disease.
- Commercial milk replacer can be fed from the end of the second day onwards but can cause scours in young lambs.

Advantages of Stomach Tubing Lambs

- It is much faster than bottle feeding
- It eliminates the risk of milk inhalation associated with bottle feeding weak lambs.
- It prevents bonding to humans and keeps the lamb with the ewe.

More Information

Anyone wishing more information on stomach tubing weak lambs, or other animal health or husbandry practices can contact their Regional Veterinarian at the offices of the Department of Natural Resources (Agrifoods Branch).

Further factsheets are also available through these offices or on our website.

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