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# Prevent Baby Lamb Starvation

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Lamb death losses are especially high at birth and within the first days after birth. The cause in many cases is starvation, or starvation associated with disease conditions that have also resulted from poor nutrition.

The first few hours of a lamb's life are the most critical. If the lamb feeds normally in these hours, it gains both nutrients and needed antibodies from colostrum milk. If it cannot feed normally, the lamb will weaken rapidly and may die within a short time.

Feeding problems and starvation are even more critical for the lamb that has been subjected to stresses such as prolonged or difficult birth, chilling and similar factors, or whose mother is slow to start producing milk.

Sheep producers can quickly recognize the normal, thrifty lamb. It is bright-eyed and alert almost from birth. It nurses and sleeps often. As it nurses, the lamb wiggles his tail and sucks vigorously.

Unthrifty lambs may be too weak to stand, or will stand with head lowered and ears drooping. They shiver or shake. They may lack coordination in the movement of head and legs. They will become gaunt and weaker as essential body fluids dehydrate. As the lamb weakens and becomes increasingly debilitated, it also becomes susceptible to invading disease organisms.

## Early Feeding Critical

Every lamb, even the lamb that is thrifty and strong, must suckle soon after birth. Unless the lamb feeds on colostrum within 2 or 3 hours following birth, its blood sugar level rapidly declines. The resultant hypoglycemia leads to shock and eventual death.

Some animal scientists believe the blood sugar level in a lamb may drop 50 percent within 15 to 30 minutes after birth. If this is correct, the time lag from birth to nursing may be more critical for a lamb than many sheep producers realize.

The type of food is also critical. The newborn lamb needs colostrum milk. Colostrum, the first milk normally provided by the mother ewe, is a laxative, highly concentrated nutrient substance. It provides readily usable energy, protein, minerals and vitamins. It also supplies gammaglobulin, a fraction containing antibodies that provide the lamb with vital resistance to disease.

If the new lamb is deprived of its mother's colostrum for any reason, you can substitute colostrum from cows, goats or other ewes. University of Idaho veterinary scientists have found colostrum from cows contains adequate amounts of gammaglobulin and that lambs appear to absorb the gammaglobulin equally well from either bovine or ovine colostrum. For its first feeding, the lamb needs at least 1 to 2 ounces (20 to 30 cc) of colostrum.

Collect and freeze a supply of colostrum — ewe, goat or cow — for use as needed to nourish weak, chilled or starved lambs. If a supply of colostrum is not available, you can feed a commercial milk replacer, or you can substitute the following "kitchen formula":

- 1½ pints milk
- 1 egg
- 1 teaspoon cod liver oil
- 1 tablespoon dark corn syrup

Blend these ingredients and administer 4 to 6 ounces of a warmed mixture 4 times per day at 6 hour intervals for the first 2 days of the lamb's life. In case of extreme dehydration, you can add electrolyte mixtures containing antibiotics. Follow manufacturer's recommendations.

## Feeding the Weak Lamb

The experienced shepherd has long recognized the need to suckle lambs soon after birth. This is a minor problem with thrifty, hungry lambs. With a little help, they will quickly find a teat and begin to nurse. More time and patience is required to suckle a weak, unthrifty lamb, especially if it is too weak to stand.



**Fig. 1.** When using the baby lamb probe, place the lamb on its right side with the head and neck extended, as shown, and place one hand around the neck so you can feel the instrument enter the esophagus.

#### Baby Lamb Probe

If the lamb cannot feed by itself, you still may be able to save its life by placing colostrum milk or other fluid directly into the rumen. A baby lamb probe is a tool that makes this possible. This instrument, a stainless steel ball probe attached to a 50 cc pistol-grip syringe or 2-ounce dose gun, is designed to prevent entry into the trachea and thus to protect against forcing fluids into the lungs.

To use the probe with a weak lamb, place the lamb on its right side with head and neck extended. As you insert the probe, place one hand around the lamb's neck so you can feel the instrument enter the esophagus. Do not force it. Give the lamb opportunity to relax and swallow to ease the entry.

Feed 1 or 2 ounces the first feeding and 4 to 6 ounces at 6-hour intervals if additional feedings are necessary. Frequently, a weak lamb will respond to one oral supplemental feeding of colostrum and will be up nursing the ewe within a few hours. An unthrifty sick lamb may require more oral feeding plus medication.

#### Feeding Milk Replacers

When early care in the lambing shed has helped the weak lamb begin nursing, its chances of survival are generally good. But what about the orphaned lamb? One possibility is to try to graft it to another ewe with ample milk. Another possibility is to continue feeding colostrum for a few days and then place the lamb on a commercial lamb milk replacer.

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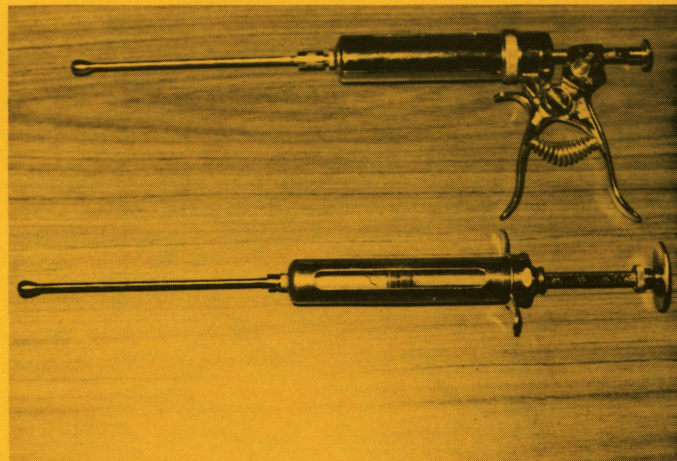
The composition of ewe's milk changes significantly over time. Milk replacers formulated to duplicate the nutrient content of natural milk are now available and are being used successfully in many farm and ranch situations.

#### Other Feeding Problems

Occasionally, lambs that are 2 to 4 weeks old become starved because of a lack of mother's milk. They may exhibit typical starvation symptoms and may also be observed to eat dirt, wool dung locks, twine or other objects. This foreign material will not digest in the lamb's stomach and may block the intestinal tract, causing bloat and eventual death. Prompt treatment with milk products containing mineral oil will provide the needed nutrient supplement and may also help to release the intestinal blockage.

Young lambs may suffer nutrient deficiency simply because older lambs are stealing milk from their mothers. You may need to return the younger lamb and its mother to a jug or smaller pen for a few days to give the lamb opportunity to gain strength. Supplemental feeding may also be necessary.

The ewe's milking ability may be another cause of nutrient deficiency. The amount of milk produced will vary with the ewes and their nutrition level. Peak milk yields may occur during the first week in poorly fed ewes, but not until about 4 weeks after lambing for ewes fed more adequate rations. Improved rations will also increase milk yields over the total lactation. In one study over a 12-week lactation period, ewes fed adequate rations produced an estimated 10 to 15 percent more milk than ewes fed less well.



**Fig. 2.** Baby lamb probes are good instruments for feeding weak lambs.

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