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Lambing Difficulty

Lambing time brings its share of difficult births. Correct technique in assisting a ewe in difficulty will enhance ewe and lamb survival.

Introduction

If ewes are to be closely observed at lambing time it is advisable to move among them quietly, causing as little disturbance as possible, on a regular basis prior to the start of lambing.

Do not try to provide assistance before it is required. Normally, the interval between the start of active straining and the birth of the lamb is one hour. If assistance is given too early the ewe's cervix may not be fully dilated and damage may result if the lamb is forcibly extracted.

Lambing kit

The minimum kit used to assist a ewe includes clean water, soap, lubricant, three pieces of thin cord half a metre long that can be boiled between cases. An aluminium shepherd's crook is especially useful for catching ewes.

If a ewe requires assistance, remember the following points:

Cleanliness

Cleanliness is essential to prevent the introduction of infection into the reproductive tract. Use a mild soap or disinfectant to wash your hands, arms and the vulva of the ewe.

Lubrication

The use of a lubricant, such as bland soap and water or obstetrical lubricant, is necessary if a hand has to be put into the ewe to deliver the lamb. Lubricant poured into the vagina will make manipulation and delivery easier, especially if the fluids surrounding the lamb have been lost or the lamb is dead and decomposing.

Be gentle

The ewe should be handled quietly. The best midwives for ewes with difficulty in lambing are frequently the female members of the family, they generally have smaller hands.

Check the presentation

Investigate the presentation of the lamb in a systematic manner. Do not attempt to pull the lamb unless it is upright with both forelegs coming first and its head lying over its knees, (see Figure 1), **or** is upright with two hind limbs and tail presented. (see Figure 2). If the head and legs are not in the normal positions they can often be gently moved into place. Do not pull the lamb until it is positioned correctly.

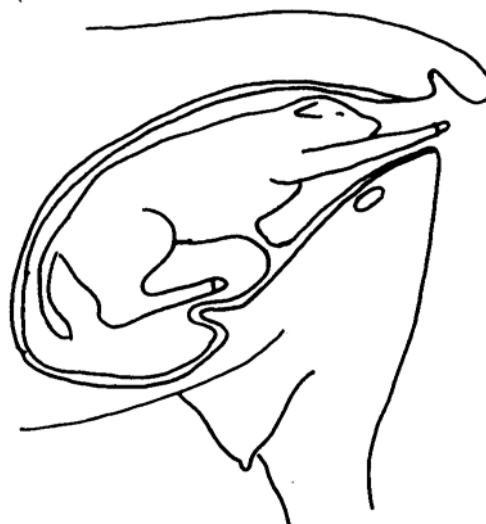


Figure 1. Normal presentation- forward

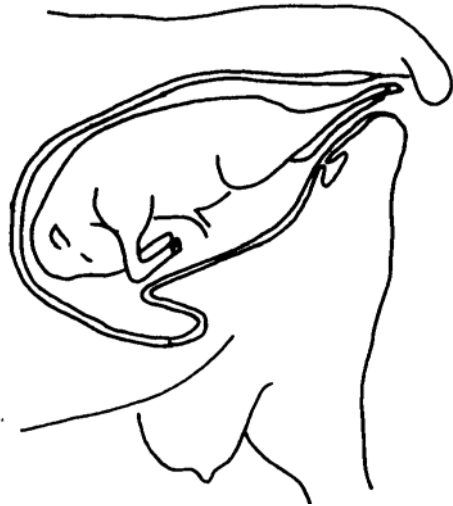


Figure 2. Normal presentation - backward

Handy hints

Whenever manipulating the lamb inside the ewe, keep in mind that sharp projections, such as the teeth of the lamb, can easily tear the soft tissues of the uterus and vagina. Cover these projections with your hand if they need to be moved inside the ewe.

A lot can be gained by gently pushing the lamb back into the uterus. This gives you more room to determine the presentation of the lamb and to apply cords for traction.

Once a lamb dies inside a ewe, the lamb swells and lubricating fluid is lost, making the uterus even more susceptible to tearing. In cases like these, pour large volumes of lubricant into the lambing passage.

If the lamb is coming forward, traction should be applied at three points. A cord with a running noose applied to each foreleg above the fetlock and a third cord with a running noose should be placed behind both ears and between the jaws (see Figure 3). Do not place the noose on the lower jaw.



Figure 3. A lamb's head, showing correct positioning of noose for applying traction to the head.

Traction should be applied steadily, not jerkily. Pull one forelimb slightly ahead of the other. This decreases the effective diameter of the lamb's chest as it passes through the ewe's pelvis.

The direction of pull is critical, once the head and legs are through the vulva, the pull should be directed towards the ewe's hocks.

If the lamb's hips become stuck in the ewe's pelvis, do not pull, rotate the lamb's hips 14 degrees from the vertical and pull in the direction of the ewe's hocks.

Causes of lambing difficulty

Size

Many lambing problems are due to disproportion in the size of the ewe and lamb, such as when a sire of a large breed is used over a small-framed ewe, or when a maiden ewe gives birth to a big lamb. Over-fat ewes can also fail to lamb, despite normal presentation of the lamb. The two front toes and the nose of the lamb are often visible, but the ewe is unable to push the lamb out any further.

If the lamb is alive, place the ewe square on her back, use plenty of lubricant, locate the forelegs and manipulate them through the pelvic inlet and deliver the lamb as described above.

Malpresentations

If the head and legs are not in the normal presentation (see Figures 1 and 2) they can often be gently moved into place. Do not try to pull the lamb out until it is positioned correctly. Remember to be gentle, clean, and use plenty of lubricant when correcting the presentation.

Common malpresentations

Head back

If the forelimbs only are presented and the head is back (see Figure 4), place a running noose on both forelimbs and gently push the lamb back into the uterus. Cup the nose of the lamb in the palm of your hand and gently bring the head around into the normal presentation. The uterus is protected from the lamb's teeth by your hand.

Place a running noose behind the lamb's ears and through its mouth. Be sure to flick each ear through the noose so the rope rests on the back of the neck (see Figure 3). Do not put the noose on the lower jaw. The jaw will break if traction is applied to the jaw alone.

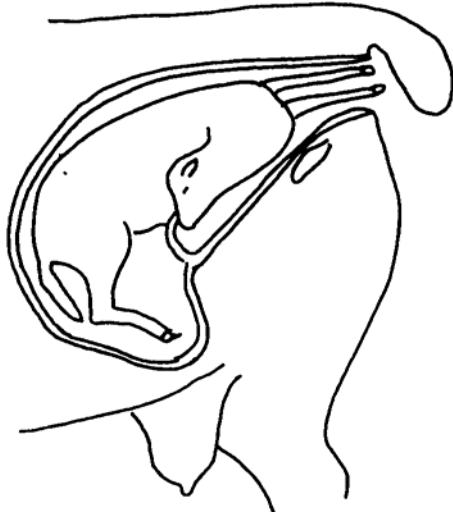


Figure 4. Head back presentation

One front leg back

It is desirable to present both front legs for delivery but not always necessary if the pelvic inlet is large enough or the lamb is small enough. In some cases the tip of the shoulder of the retained leg can be brought through the pelvis and the lamb delivered by traction on the head and other forelimb.

Head-only presentation, both forelimbs back.

If the lamb is dead its head can be cut off and the body pushed back into the uterus, protecting the vagina from the exposed neck bones with your hand. The forelimbs can then be brought into the birth canal and traction applied to deliver the lamb.

Breech presentation

In the true breech presentation, only the tail is presented and both the back legs are tucked up under the lamb (see Figure 5). Each hind limb needs to be brought into the birth canal separately. Gently repel the tail of the lamb back into the uterus, cup the fetlock of one hind limb of the lamb in the palm of your hand and manoeuvre the leg into the birth canal.

Repeat the process for the other hind limb and deliver the lamb by traction on both hind limbs, keeping the direction of pull towards the ewe's hocks.

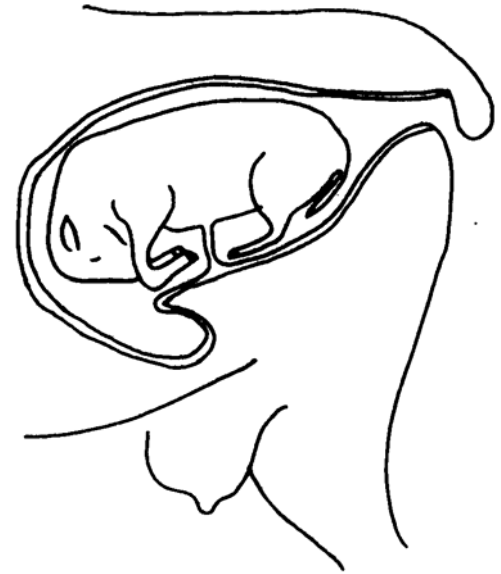


Figure 5. Breech presentation

Do not try to turn the lamb around. This is almost impossible to do without losing the lamb or causing damage to the uterus. It is easy to deliver a lamb backwards once both hind limbs have been brought into the birth canal.

Twins and multiples

All the above principles apply to delivering multiple lambs. It is essential to establish which legs belong to which head, correct the presentation of each lamb, (to either forward or backward presentation) and apply traction.

It may be necessary to repel one lamb to allow easy delivery of the other. Always deliver the backward-presented lamb first if possible, because there are only two legs to identify as opposed to two legs and a head in the forward presentation.

After delivery

After all deliveries check that there are no other lambs remaining in the uterus. In many cases failure to perform this simple examination may mean that you are presented with a sick ewe in two or three days time with a dead, decomposing lamb still undelivered.

Make sure that the lamb gets its first breath by cleaning the mucus from the mouth and nose. Swing the lamb gently by the back legs to help clean mucus and birth fluids from the air ways.

If you need to determine if the lamb is alive, a soft touch of the cornea of the eye with the finger will make a live lamb blink, and a finger placed down the lamb's throat should make it swallow.

The ewe should be allowed to smell her lamb as soon as possible after birth. If she looks as if she will run away and leave the lamb when she is released, it is advisable to confine the ewe and lamb in a small pen until they have bonded.

If the lamb delivered is alive but weak, a feed of warm colostrum through a stomach tube will enhance its chances of survival.

After delivery of a decomposing lamb, antibiotic treatment may increase the ewe's chances of recovery. Consult your veterinarian for advice.

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