



SHEEP SHEET

Dystocia (Lambing Difficulty)

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Dystocia, or difficult birth, is common in sheep and causes the death of many lambs and ewes. Yearling ewes and lambs are much more susceptible to lambing problems than mature ewes that have lamb previously. Obesity and lack of exercise during late pregnancy contribute to the incidence and severity of dystocia in sheep.

Ability to recognize lambing difficulty is an important as technique in relieving dystocia. A common error of the inexperienced shepherd is to intervene too early in the lambing process. A vaginal examination of lambing ewes should not be performed unless necessary because it increases the risk of infection of the female reproductive tract after lambing. A good rule of thumb is not to intervene as long as a ewe is making progress. When a ewe has been in full labor for 30 to 40 minutes with no progress, examine it to determine if the lamb is positioned correctly. Never try to force the cervix open because it often leads to hemorrhage, shock, trauma, and post-lambing infection.

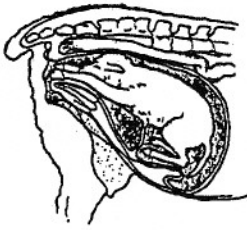
There are a few hard and fast rules about handling dystocia. Gradually developing expertise through experience is often the best way to learn. Beyond simple assistance, the novice should call a veterinarian (if nearby) when in doubt about proper procedures. Many lambs and ewes die because of prolonged manipulation of lambs in the birth canal and excessive forced extraction of the lamb(s). Never try to extract forcibly a lamb that is in an abnormal position. The position of the lamb must be corrected before attempting actual deliver. Excessive force can result in shock, hemorrhage, trauma, and post-lambing infection, fertility problems, and very possibly an eversion or prolapse of the vagina and uterus.

Sheepdex E-1

If an examination is deemed necessary, clip excess and dirty wool from around the anus and vulva and then scrub this area thoroughly with soap (preferable a disinfectant soap) and water. Re-scrub whenever the ewe contaminates the area with feces (manure) during delivery. Under some conditions antiseptic procedures are almost impossible. However, try to be as clean as possible. Carefully scrub your hand and arm with soap and water and apply a mild antiseptic. It is also recommended that during the lambing season shepherds should keep their fingernails trimmed very short, in order to prevent tearing the soft tissue of the ewe's reproductive tract when assistance is rendered. Many, but not all shepherds use a disposable plastic or rubber veterinary obstetrical glove/sleeve. Next apply liberal amounts of a lubricant jelly to either the sleeve or bare hands and arms. **This is most important and do not forget this requirement!** It is almost impossible to use too much lubricant. Ewes that have been in labor for a long period often have a dry birth canal or vaginal area. Failure to properly lubricate the birth canal usually results in trauma and tearing of the soft tissues, a very difficult birth, and the prospects of infection after delivery. It is often recommended to put mineral oil, lubricant jelly or soapy water in the birth canal and even in the uterus before handling the unborn lamb.

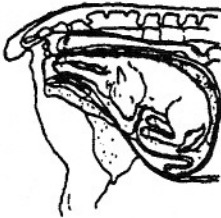
The **normal presentation** or position of a lamb during birth is head first with the head between the forelegs. With multiple births, it is common to have the legs of one lamb and the head of another entering the opening of the birth canal at the same time. If forelegs and the head are present in the birth canal, gently pull on the legs to make sure that they are from the same lamb as the head. If the legs and head do not belong to the same lamb, take plenty of time to repel (push back) the head if necessary and follow the legs up to the body. If the problem is simultaneous delivery of twins, repel one back into the uterus while holding the other. This is accomplished by putting a lamb saver or lamb snare over the head of the lamb nearest the birth canal and holding it toward the rear of the ewe while repelling the other lamb. Do this carefully and gently, using lots of lubricant.

Normal Presentation



Anterior presentation (head first) with the lamb's head turned backward is another common cause of dystocia. Repel the lamb, place a snare over the head, bring the forelegs into the birth canal, and begin steady traction on the lamb after thoroughly lubricating the birth canal. Use good judgement and common sense on the amount of traction (pressure) applied to the lamb. Once the head and forelegs are through the birth canal, apply traction as much in a downward as an outward direction because the birth canal is arc (curved) shaped. Pulling straight back forces the lamb into the top of the birth canal. Take advantage of the physical principle of using the pelvis as a fulcrum and it makes assisting a difficult birth much easier on the shepherd and especially the ewe and the lamb.

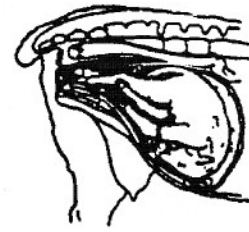
Anterior Presentation



Lambs can be born quite easily in the posterior presentation where the rear of the lamb is presented toward the birth canal. Bring both rear legs into the birth canal, lubricate, and pull steadily. A **breech presentation** is the rear of the lamb presented to the birth canal with both rear legs forward. Repel the lamb forward, grasp one rear leg, and bring it into the birth canal. Follow with the other leg. Use extreme care because the toes of the rear leg can easily penetrate (puncture or tear) the wall of the uterus during this procedure. When in doubt, call an experienced shepherd or a veterinarian.

One of the most serious problems and, unfortunately, fairly common problems is a ewe that has been in labor for a long time with a dead, swollen, retained lamb, and possibly mummified. The birth canal is dry, swollen, and the ewe may be quite sick. Seek professional attention because the life of the ewe is at risk. After delivery of the dead (necrotic) lamb, treat the ewe rigorously for infection and toxemia.

Breech Presentation



Occasionally, delivery through the birth canal is impossible, usually because of an excessively large lamb. A Caesarian section can be quickly and easily performed in such situations. A veterinarian or experienced shepherd should make this decision. The prognosis for both the ewe and lamb(s) is much better by avoiding prolonged attempts at delivery through the birth canal. When in doubt, get professional help.

Other Lambing Problems

Several other problems can occur at or near lambing time. Vaginal prolapse prior to lambing is common and may occur in large numbers in a flock. If this is a problem, a veterinarian, sheep expert, or extension agent should evaluate diets, housing (if any), exercise, and general management.

Failure of the cervix to dilate (opening between uterus and vagina, which lamb must pass), especially in ewe lambs, is a problem in some flocks. Its cause is not fully known. Selenium deficiency is known to be one contributing factor to this problem, but there are many others. Seek professional assistance if unsure.

Use drugs and hormones, such as oxytocin, only under the guidance of a veterinarian, and when needed. Purchase of such prescription drugs without the order of a veterinarian is a violation of the Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act. Under a veterinarian-client-patient relationship, such drugs may be very valuable in the handling of obstetrical and lactation problems of ewes, but misuse is dangerous.

For more information write The Navajo Sheep Project, Inc. PO Box 4454, Logan, UT 84323-4454. The Navajo Sheep Project is a registered non-profit Utah corporation.