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The sheep sales have only just finished and already lambing is just round the corner. Lambing in this practice is no longer a rush of frantic activity in the spring, like Christmas it lasts longer every year. Pedigree sheep start after Christmas and hill flocks are still at it into May but good preparation whenever sheep are due will help ensure a healthy crop of lambs.

GET READY FOR LAMBING

Andy Barrett Kingsway Veterinary Group

Getting ewes' nutritional status right is the single most important aspect of preparation; two thirds of lamb deaths are a result of conditions that have their origin during pregnancy rather than at lambing time. Growth of the placenta is important because it determines the size of the lambs and, the hormones the placenta produces affect the yield of colostrum and influence the mothering ability of the ewe.

Scanning to check lamb numbers allows better feeding of ewes carrying multiple lambs and condition scoring sheep as often as they are handled means that feeding can be corrected if necessary. Lowland ewes should be in condition score three at the end of the third month of pregnancy and hill sheep score two. If a lot of sheep are thin, liver fluke, external parasites or trace element problems may be responsible, the higher the proportion of the flock that are affected the more likely it is that there is a management problem. Faecal or wool examination and blood sampling may help sort this out.

Three quarters of foetal growth occurs in the last six weeks of pregnancy and ewes in good body condition at this time have the lowest lamb losses if they are fed well until lambing. Condition scores change relatively slowly, if there are doubts about the adequacy of nutrition then blood sampling a group of 10 ewes a month before lambing and testing BHB levels provides a cheap and quick way of checking feeding.

Flat rate feeding while easier to manage requires good quality forage and may not be sufficient for very thin ewes. If swayback has been previously diagnosed copper supplementation should be given in mid-pregnancy. Glass boluses supply copper over the longest period, copper capsules and injections will also effectively prevent swayback.

Copper can be very toxic to lowland sheep and should not be used unless clinical swayback problems have occurred, be particularly careful of giving copper

supplements just before housing sheep and feeding them concentrates which supply copper in a more available form.

Clostridial vaccine boosters should be given to ewes six to eight weeks before lambing is due. If replacement ewes have been bought in it may be best to give them a full course rather than assuming that they have previously been injected.





Many farms rely on extra help when lambing is in full swing. Vet and agriculture students are often available; your local XLVets practice will be able to put you in touch with the vet schools to arrange for an extra pair of hands. With five percent of ewes in UK flocks dying around lambing time; three quarters of these because of lambing difficulties, it is worth taking the time to make sure that any helpers who aren't experienced shepherds know when to call for help.

Plans should also be made to treat sheep suffering from the problems most flocks suffer at lambing time like prolapses, twin lamb disease, hypocalcaemia and mastitis.

In large flocks written protocols will help all staff to know what treatment should be given.

Finally a check round the lambing shed and medicine cupboard will help make sure that everything needed is to hand.

LAMBING CHECKLIST

- ✓ Arm length disposable gloves
- ✓ Lubricant
- ✓ A head rope or lambing snare
- ✓ Disinfectant solution
- ✓ Calcium injection
- ✓ Energy supplement like propylene glycol to treat twin lamb disease
- ✓ Syringes and needles
- ✓ Antibiotic injections for treating mastitis and metritis
- ✓ Anti-inflammatory injection for use after lambing
- ✓ Prolapse retainers
- ✓ Strong iodine (10% tincture of iodine) for dipping navels
- ✓ Colostrum (ideally frozen sheep colostrum, if not goat or cow or powdered colostrum substitute)
- ✓ Thermometer
- ✓ Stomach tubes
- ✓ A warming box
- ✓ Glucose for intraperitoneal injection of hypothermic lambs
- ✓ Oral antibiotics for watery mouth treatment

