

Preparing for the Birth of Lambs and Goat Kids

When anticipating the birth of lambs or goat kids, advance preparation is the key to good survival rates. A birthing area that is clean and dry is optimal for the ewe or doe and their babies. Losses can be reduced when birthing is monitored. Assisting a mother or baby in distress can only happen if they are under close observation. Nature tells the lamb or goat kid, along with the prodding by the mother, to get up and nurse as soon as possible after birth. In the case of multiple births, remove the weakest baby and try to get another ewe or doe to accept it if one is available.

When planning for a birth, it is important to have three items for the health of babies on hand: dried colostrum, milk replacer and electrolytes. Be sure these products are labeled specially for lambs or goat kids. In every herd, there is the likelihood for the need of artificial feeding of lambs or goat kids. When the ewe or doe dies, lacks enough milk to feed her young, or abandons her newborns, it is important to supplement. The first few hours and days are critical in getting the babies off to a good start.

Colostrum

After the first few hours of birth, the physiology of the baby lamb or kid allows for the absorption of key components (antibodies or IgGs in the colostrum) directly into the blood stream via the intestine. This passive transfer stage is the only time in its life that this phenomenon occurs. It is nature's way of protecting the baby by "jump starting" their immune system. When fed colostrum, either by nursing the mother or with maternal colostrum from another ewe or doe in the same herd, the baby receives antibodies specific to the herd. To be certain that the lamb or goat kid receives adequate colostrum, it is advisable to milk the mother and feed the baby with a bottle; freezing any excess colostrum for later use.

There are times when the ewe or doe will not have enough colostrum or she may lack quality colostrum. In the case of multiple births, there is often not enough volume of colostrum for each of the twins or triplets. If the ewe or doe has mastitis or an injury to her udder, she may not produce quality colostrum for her babies. Signs of poor quality colostrum include, but are not limited to: visible blood or the presence of clots or chunks. Poor quality colostrum should not be fed to the baby. In the case of a shortage or absence of colostrum, supplementing with a purchased colostrum replacer/supplement specific to lamb or goat kids is important. The first few hours of the newborn's life are critical and timing is very important, which is why frozen or purchased colostrum should be on hand at all times because birthing often happens when stores are closed.

Although lambs and goat kids can survive without the nutritional aspects of colostrum, it is very difficult for them to live healthy lives without the immunity colostrum contains. Along with antibodies or IgGs, colostrum has many components that help the baby to survive. After the first 12-24 hours, the natural passive transfer of the antibodies ceases and the colostrum is easily digested by the baby. Feeding a lesser amount and adding colostrum to the milk or milk replacer on days 2 through 4 is a good practice, allowing the mother to continue to pass along the key components for the baby's development and immunity via colostrum.

Lamb or Goat Kid Milk Replacer

It is preferable for the ewe or doe to feed her baby when possible; however, in the case of death, illness, multiple births or the sale of the mother's milk, a milk replacer is a viable option. Stay away from homemade milk replacers and use one technically

formulated with feeding directions for lamb or goat kids. Keep a small bag of animal specific milk replacer on hand during birthing season. It can be kept in the freezer to help extend its freshness. Lambs do not tolerate higher copper levels and an imbalance of minerals may occur if a newborn is fed a product that is formulated for another species. There are “multi-species” formulas available that are very good, but be sure to follow the directions according to the baby animal you are feeding.

Mixing the right amount of dry powder and warm water will allow for the best nutritional level of the milk replacer. Always follow the proper mixing and feeding directions on the package or tag, which shows how much water or powdered milk by weight the measuring device inside holds. If the directions are specific to powder measurement and say to mix into a quart of water, the liquid should be measured with a standard measuring cup. The wrong ratio or over-feeding can happen more easily if you are bottle-feeding the baby, which can lead to poor growth and development, bloat, illness and/or death.

Electrolytes

Lambs and goat kids can be exposed to organisms such as bacteria and viruses in their environment. They can also develop nutritional scours due to overfeeding. If an animal scours or has diarrhea, it will need nutritional support. The population of “bad” bugs will grow and may produce toxins which can take over the normal flora of the gut. The body of the animal will then pump fluid into the gut to flush out the toxins, resulting in scouring which can quickly lead to dehydration. It is critical to feed electrolytes to a lamb or goat kid when the loose stools or scours are observed. Do not stop feeding milk replacer as the baby still needs the nutrients. Follow the mixing and label directions of the product you use. Electrolytes and milk replacer must be fed separately. It is also important to choose a product that has labeled instructions for the species you are feeding.

Animals that die after scouring and are posted by a veterinarian or lab will typically be diagnosed with dehydration. It is not always the disease or nutrition imbalance that kills them, but the loss of body fluid as their body tries to eliminate the cause of the scouring. Newborn lambs and goat kids do not have a lot of body mass, so it does not take long for dehydration to occur causing life-threatening issues. Always have electrolytes on hand as a newborn animal may only have a few hours to live if they are not given an electrolyte to help them reverse the results of loss of body fluid.