

# Lambing

## Lambing Part 6 – Fostering, Docking and Castration

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### Fostering

The perinatal lamb mortality rate is unacceptably high in many sheep flocks; as a consequence of such deaths triplet lambs are fostered on to those ewes which have lost a lamb. In addition, lambs are also fostered onto those ewes which produce a single lamb.

No large scale surveys have been undertaken to determine the number of attempted "fosterings" in lowground flocks but it could be more than 10 to 15 per cent of all ewes. This procedure is not as simple as would first appear and the long-term acceptance rate by the ewe is likely to be less than 60 per cent.



*Fig 1: Rejected foster lamb. Note the size disparity - was this ever a realistic proposition?*



*Fig 2: Success in this fostering situation.*

### Origin of orphan lambs

Orphan lambs are small birthweight twin or triplet lambs removed because of poor dam milk yield. The majority of these lambs have failed to ingest sufficient colostrum and are therefore prone to a wide range of bacterial diseases during the neonatal period including polyarthritis, enteric infections, and respiratory disease. These lambs may have been hungry for a number of days before removal from the dam.

It is been recommended that "surplus" lambs are removed from the ewe as early as possible because

these lambs learn to suck much more quickly from the milk bar than if left with their dam for two or three days. It could be reasoned that the smallest triplet of every litter should be removed within hours of birth, fed colostrum, and either fostered immediately or reared artificially. The ewe and two remaining lambs could then be turned out to pasture the following day.

### Transfer of foetal fluids

Rubbing an orphan lamb in the foetal fluids of the newborn single lamb before the ewe licks her own lamb is the most successful fostering method where good acceptance rates are achieved when the foster lamb is as young as possible, and preferably newborn. A variation on the fostering method described above is to place both lambs in a hessian sack which is then tied at the neck and placed in the pen with the ewe for one hour. This practice facilitates mixing of odours and increases the foster lamb acceptance rate when the lambs are introduced to the anxious ewe. Disparity in size of the new "pair" of lambs typically results (6-7 kg singleton and 3.5 kg triplet).

### "Skinning" lambs

Fostering lambs with the aid of the dead lamb's skin generally has good success although confinement in a small pen for a few days may be necessary.



*Fig 3: Confinement for several days - note the leathery appearance of the foster "jacket".*

### Foster crates

There are many designs of foster crates. It is essential that clean water and good quality roughage are always available and that concentrates were fed at least twice daily where the ewe can reach them. Inadequate ewe nutrition leads to poor milk production and poor long-term acceptance rates.



**Fig 4:** It is essential that clean water and good quality roughage are always available to ensure the ewe's milk yield is maintained.

### Rope halters

The use of rope halter provides limited freedom and improved comfort for the ewe provided the halter does not tighten across the bridge of the ewe's nose. Halters should be made of soft rope and not a single strand of polypropylene baler twine. Occasionally, the rope is tied around the ewe's horns which is unacceptable.



**Fig 5:** Soft nylon halters must be used not single-strand baler twine.

### Rejection of foster lamb

The ewe and lambs must be carefully supervised to detect early rejection such as not letting the foster lamb suck, pushing the lamb away, to vigorous head butting which can cause severe chest trauma, and indeed death in neglected cases. Head butting lambs can often be detected by the presence of marker fluid used to identify lambs on the ewe's forehead.

### Rearing orphan lambs

Orphan lambs can be reared very successfully on artificial rearing systems achieving excellent growth rates and a low incidence of digestive disturbances such as abomasal bloat and/or volvulus. Haphazard feeding of lambs from a bucket and teat system does not work and at five week-old such lambs are small, poorly-fleshed and pot-bellied, and remain so for many months.

### The Codes of recommendations for the welfare of livestock - sheep

- Artificial rearing of lambs requires close attention and high standards of supervision and stockmanship

if it is to be successful. It is essential that all lambs should start with an adequate supply of colostrum.

- All lambs should receive an adequate amount of suitable liquid feed, such as ewe milk replacer, at regular intervals each day for at least the first four weeks of their life.
- From the second week of life, lambs should also have access to palatable and nutritious solid food (which may include grass) and always have access to fresh, clean water.
- Where automatic feeding equipment is provided, lambs should be trained in its use to ensure that they regularly consume an adequate amount of food and the equipment should be checked daily to see that it is working properly.
- Troughs should be kept clean and any stale feed removed. Automatic feeding systems must be well-maintained and checked daily.
- Equipment and utensils used for liquid feeding should be thoroughly cleansed and sterilised at frequent intervals.
- A dry bed and adequate draught-free ventilation should be provided.
- Where necessary, arrangements should be made to supply safe supplementary heating for very young lambs.



**Fig 6:** While the system may appear expensive at first, artificial rearing of lambs produces excellent results.



**Fig 7:** Exemplary management of orphan lambs. Well-bedded, low stocking rate and good ventilation.

### Docking and Castration

There is a large body of evidence that tail docking and castration cause both acute and chronic pain in lambs and there are doubts whether both (either)

procedures are necessary in fattening lambs sold before December (8-9 month-old) when pregnancy is not a major concern.



**Fig 8:** There is a large body of evidence that tail docking and castration cause both acute and chronic pain in lambs.

There is a lot of very useful advice contained within the Codes of recommendations for the welfare of livestock - sheep available at <http://www.awtraining.com/pdf/pdffiles/sheep.pdf>



**Fig 9:** Exemplary management - note this 40+ kg 3.5 month-old ram lamb has not been castrated; the next stage is to not tail dock.



**Fig10:** Great stock management - why tail dock these lambs which will be slaughtered before mid-June?

**Welfare code recommendation 62:** Farmers and shepherds should consider carefully whether tail docking within a particular flock is necessary. Tail docking may be carried out only if failure to do so would lead to subsequent welfare problems because of dirty tails and potential fly strike.



**Fig 11:** Tail docking has not prevented faecal contamination of the perineum in these Suffolk hogs.



**Fig 12:** Texel ewe just before lambing - this tail length is too short and probably illegal although slackening of the pelvic ligaments may exacerbate this effect.



**Fig 13:** This ram's tail is too short and has just been bought at a major ram sale!



**Fig 14:** Tail docking did not prevent flystrike in this lamb (standing). Shearing is also overdue on this farm.

Blowfly strike is prevented by controlling faecal contamination of the perineum by correct parasite control, dagging when appropriate, and use of insect growth regulators such as dicyclanil as necessary.

Government regulatory authorities are actively promoting schemes to reduce tail docking and

castration of lambs; some of these schemes offer financial incentives. In these schemes farmers are encouraged to limit use of such procedures to

specific instances where their veterinary practitioner considers that not undertaking them would compromise animal welfare.

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