

LAMB SURVIVAL – The first 24 hours

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Today's shepherds are different from those of 50 years ago. Most shepherds nowadays have very little time to spend with the lambs—an hour or so in the morning and then it's off to their day job for 8 to 10 hours. If shepherds work close to home, then they may also have a couple of evening hours to spend in the barn.

If we can get the lamb through the first 24 hours, its chance of survival is greatly increased. Below are a few things that will help the lambs and the shepherd survive cold weather lambing.

First of all, strong healthy lambs come from ewes that are the same. Make sure your ewes are in good shape before breeding and do not lose too much condition during gestation. Putting them on the best feed you have 6 weeks before lambing will help to make sure the ewe has plenty of milk and the lamb has a good supply of fat where he needs it. This gives the lamb the strength to get up and start nursing as soon as he is born. There is nothing better to see when you walk into the barn than a set of healthy newborn twins nursing with their tails wagging.

Create a routine that makes every minute count, beginning when you first walk into the lambing barn.

Ewes have a wax plug in their teats. In cold weather that plug can be difficult for weak lambs to suck out. So grab each ewe that lambs and strip out each teat to make sure there is plenty of milk for the lambs.

The next step is to take the temperature of each lamb. Your body temperature is 98.6, and the lambs' temp should be 102. If you put your finger into the lamb's mouth and it feels warm, he is fine. If his mouth feels cold, you have a lamb that is in trouble.

For any lamb that is warm, all you need to do is to dip the navel into iodine to help stop infection and they should be fine.

The cold lambs need help right away. First try to get the lamb to suck for himself. If he will not, you will need to tube-feed him. I like the 140 cc syringe and plastic tube the best for this. The 60 cc is too small and must be refilled several times in order to get enough milk in the lamb. A 10-pound lamb needs 50 cc of milk every hour. By giving him a feeding of 140 cc, he has about 3 hours to gain his strength and begin to nurse on his own. Also, I do not like putting a tube down the lamb's throat too often--this can make it sore to the point where the lamb does not want to swallow. I like the plastic tube because it's easier to use on a lamb that fights you. In very cold barns the red tube is better as it will stay flexible.

THIS IS VERY IMPORTANT: If a lamb cannot hold its head up on its own, **do not tube-feed** it. Many lambs die because they are too cold and weak when being tube-fed, and they drown from the milk. You must first warm up the lamb. Put a heat lamp over the lamb until he can control his head. Then it's safe to feed him.

Heat lamps are a great source of warmth when needed, but do not overdo it. When a healthy lamb gets cold, he needs to get up and eat to stay warm. They can become too dependent on heat lamps.

To make sure the lambs have a good start, some shepherds who have the time will tube-feed every lamb that is born with colostrum from its mother. Or, you may want to use energy boost drench (this is not a substitute for colostrum), a product that works well to start all lambs. One pump to each lamb will give them a boost to improve their chances during the first 24 hours.

If your barn temperature is below freezing and you need to be away, put a lamb cover on each of the newborn lambs. It will help them to adjust to the cold before losing too much heat. When you return to the barn, remove the cover and the lamb should be fine.

So remember:

- Feed the ewes well.
- Strip out every teat.
- Take the lambs' temperature.
- Tube-feed when needed.

- Give each lamb a pump of energy boost drench
- Dip all navels in iodine