

Ewe Nutrition for Lambing

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The value of ewes and the lambs they produce has improved dramatically over the last couple of years. The key to successful flock performance is to achieve a good crop of lambs and to minimise losses. Working with your vet at a pre-lambing visit can help avoid the most common pitfalls.

- Managing the condition of ewes correctly during pregnancy will have a major impact on losses around lambing time both in ewes and their lambs. Poor nutrition prior to lambing will lead to weak lambs, poor colostrum and milk production along with losses due to twin lamb and other ewe diseases.
- Regular body condition scoring throughout pregnancy is vital to assess how well your ewes are having their nutritional requirements met. If you are unsure how to condition score, ask your vet to teach you!

In sheep, the lamb becomes attached to the womb at about 35 days and from there up until about the 12th week of pregnancy the lambs are relatively small and ewes can obtain enough energy from reasonable grazing to maintain pregnancy. Beyond this, additional feed will be required for thin ewes and ewes carrying multiples.

- Scan and body-condition score your ewes around the 70- 90 day mark so that you can identify barren, singles and multiples for later management. Scanning may also pick up ewes that are going to lamb at the end of the lambing period. Depending on numbers, they can either be managed separately or kept with the singles for longer. Obviously, if feed is scarce it makes sense to cull barren and split your flock so that your multiples can be treated preferentially.
- In later pregnancy, ewes carrying multiples may be unable to eat enough to maintain their lambs and themselves and will draw on body reserves. If

these reserves are not available then twin lamb disease and other metabolic conditions may follow.

Supplementary feeds - Forages

In severe winters, where no grazed grass is available, then ewes in mid pregnancy will require 3-4 kg of a good quality silage (or 1-1.5 kg hay) per head per day to maintain body condition. Silage and hay can vary hugely in quality so have it analysed to avoid over or underfeeding. A good quality silage will have a dry matter of 25% plus and a D value of more than 65, but protein values can be as high as 22% or as low as 8% so the protein requirement will obviously vary significantly. Knowing what your forage contains allows you to pitch your concentrate levels correctly.

Supplementary Feed - concentrates

Ideally formulate your feed to complement your forage.

- If you are home mixing, use a good quality protein source and use rolled rather than whole grains to avoid grain being passed undigested. A simple two parts barley with one part beet pulp and one part soya with some molasses and minerals will likely produce an 18% protein mix that will be digestible and of good quality.
- If you are buying a compound then check the ingredients before ordering. Two 18% rations may be of completely different energy values. Avoid compounds containing a lot of feed by-products such as cocoa and citrus pulp and remember, if you don't recognise it, it is probably of low quality! It's also worth noting that ingredients are (or should be!) listed in order of percentage inclusion, which will give you an indication of how the compound is likely to perform.
- Aim to have an energy density of no lower than 12MJ/kg and ideally higher than the ME of the forage.



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How much concentrate to feed?

Again this will come down to the quality of forage and nature of concentrate available and the number of lambs expected. For example, on reasonable quality big bale silage, start feeding

- Twin bearers 250g per head 4 - 6 weeks prior to lambing and increase by 100g-150g per week up until lambing.
- Triples will need to be fed two weeks earlier.
- Singles in good condition can start 2 weeks later. Make sure you have adequate trough space (at least 18 inches per head) to avoid bullying. Once lambing has begun don't forget that the ewe's milk production doesn't peak for 3-6 weeks and ewes should continue to be fed for this time or until grass growth produces pasture of at least 4 inches of grass cover.

Minerals

Deficiencies of vitamin E and selenium can cause lambs to have poor vigour so adequate levels of trace elements are important. Don't assume that ewes will take what they need from mineral licks, as consumption of these will vary massively.

Blood Sampling

This can be used to assess the energy status of your ewes in the run up to lambing.

- High levels of butyrate can indicate weight loss and risk of twin lamb disease.
- Trace element levels can also be checked to avoid deficiencies or unnecessary supplements.
- Plan to have samples taken early enough to spot problems before they happen rather than to find out why things went wrong.

The sooner you get your vet involved the better advice he can give you and the more time you have to make it pay!