

# Step-by-step guide to dealing with vaginal prolapses in sheep

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varying in size from a tennis ball to a melon.

On examination the cervix can also be found as a small opening, as illustrated in the picture left.

## How can you identify the early signs of a prolapse?

Most ewes will prolapse in the last month of pregnancy. Early signs of a ewe prolapsing are similar to the signs of the early stages of labour and include:

- \* Isolation from the flock
- \* Stealing lambs
- \* Nesting behaviour/pawing at bedding
- \* Bleating
- \* Abdominal pressing or straining.

## How can you treat a vaginal prolapse?

\* Vaginal prolapses should be replaced quickly to prevent further trauma and tears in the vagina.

If the prolapse remains out for a prolonged period of time the blood flow to the tissue can be reduced causing tissue death; the prolapse turns purple/black in colour and becomes dry, fragile and easy to damage.

Ideally, a ewe should be taken to a veterinary surgeon for treatment as they can administer an epidural (local anaesthetic injected into the spinal canal) which numbs the area around the vulva and reduces the ewe pushing, which eases replacement of the prolapse.

But you may wish to replace the prolapse yourself using the following steps.

### 1. CLEAN IT

Wash the prolapse with plenty of clean, warm water containing a suitable antiseptic or disinfectant. Ensure contamination such as muck and straw are removed.

### 2. CHECK IT

A thorough inspection of the prolapse should be made to check for any tears or signs the ewe is trying to lamb: waterbags or legs/tail may be felt passing through the cervix.

In either case seek veterinary advice. If intestines are visible through a tear, euthanasia is advisable.

### 3. LUBRICATE IT

Cover with lubricating gel.

### 4. REPLACE IT

Always handle the prolapse carefully to avoid damage. Try using either the flat of your hand or a fist.

With many prolapses the urinary bladder has actually flipped up inside the prolapse, blocking the neck of the bladder.

If you gently lift the prolapse up, towards the tail, this often allows the ewe to pass urine and the pro-

lapse will reduce in size.

Then, using gentle pressure you can push the prolapse back into the ewe.

Often a ewe will continue to strain during replacement, but avoid pushing harder against her; instead just use enough pressure to stop the prolapse coming back out when she strains, then when she stops continue to replace it.

### 5. KEEPING IT IN

Once you have successfully replaced the prolapse, there are three ways to keep it in the ewe.

\* Harness (shown below): These are designed to apply pressure around the vulva and prevent the prolapse recurring.

These should be fitted correctly and checked regularly to ensure they do not cause sores.



Harnesses should be loosened or removed around lambing to allow the lambs to pass.

\* Spoon/T-piece/retainer (shown below): This is a T-shaped device that is inserted into the vagina and then secured to the ewe using string.

Always ensure the device is cleansed and disinfected prior to insertion.



In most cases the ewe will be able to lamb past the spoon, but ideally it should be removed when lambing occurs.

\* Buhner sutures (under local anaesthetic only): This is where sutures are placed into the vulval skin and pulled tight, so that only two fingers can pass through.

If these sutures are used they must be loosened at lambing otherwise the lambs may not pass, or the

ewe will tear the sutures out causing severe damage to the area.

### 6. INJECT

Affected ewes should be given a broad-spectrum antibiotic and a painkiller to help reduce infection.

### 7. MARK THE EWE

Vaginal prolapses are highly repeatable, so these ewes should be marked permanently (marker spray or ear mark/tag) and should not be retained for breeding.

### 8. PREVENTION

There are several reasons why ewes may prolapse prior to lambing; these are outlined in the table below with suggestions for control.

#### PROLAPSE MANAGEMENT TIPS

Cause	Control
High body condition score	Appropriate nutrition
Carrying multiple lambs	Scan ewes/appropriate nutrition
Bulky diet	Avoid a diet high in root crops in late pregnancy
Lameness (increases lying down time)	Five-point lameness control plan
Lack of exercise	Effective housing
Low blood calcium	Appropriate nutrition

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