

Weaning lambs

Properly weaning ewes from their lambs can have a significant impact on current and future lamb crops. In operations, where lambs are weaned young and reared on concentrates, weaning usually takes place at six to ten weeks of age. Providing a pelleted creep feed to lambs from early in life, may help reduce the stress of the transition and decrease the drop in condition. In a pasture system, lambs are weaned at the end of the summer when the availability of pasture limits the growth of the lambs, and when ewes need to be dried off for rebreeding.

At least 7 days before weaning, protein and energy levels in lactation diets should be reduced as this has been shown to reduce the discomfort felt by ewes on weaning. This also encourages consumption of dry feed by the lamb. Low quality feedstuffs, such as cornstalks and straw, make excellent lactation rations for the week prior to weaning. The change in diet will initiate the drying-up process prior to weaning. Ewes should be maintained on low quality diets for at least 7 days post weaning.

The weaning strategy should be such that it minimizes the stress to both the ewe and the lamb. The ewes should be quietly removed to quarters where they are out of sight and hearing of the lambs. Lambs should be kept in familiar surroundings. The weaning strategy should also minimize the incidence of mastitis infections and ensure adequate milk production for the following lactation (decrease energy in ewe diet one week before and for two weeks after weaning). Ewes that are severely infected with mastitis or have chronic mastitis problems should be culled from the ewe flock.

Once weaning is complete, the lambs should be observed carefully for early signs of illness, and to ensure they are getting enough feed and water. Prior to weaning, the lambs should be consuming sufficient amounts of feed and water to meet their requirements, and should be familiar with feeders and waterers. Early weaned lambs (less than 8 weeks of age) should have access to high quality lamb creep feed.

