

# Ewe nutrition in late pregnancy

Adequate feeding to ensure good colostrum production is critical, says **Richard Knight**



**Richard Knight**

Director

Westmorland Veterinary Group

"The birds and plants seem easily confused as to when spring might be arriving; even I admit that there is something in the air. Time then for the perennial reminder about ewe nutrition in late pregnancy and its importance on colostrum production.

When the lamb is born it has no immediate immunity (blame the ovine placenta), just some glycogen and a bit of fat for energy. The colder, wetter and windier the weather is, the less time the lamb has got – as little as four hours if things are pretty bad, and a bit of a shame if it's born at an unsociable hour when there are not many folk



around. Colostrum intakes of 180-210ml/kg of lamb are required during the first 18 hours of life. In the short term this colostrum is required for energy, but pretty quickly the lamb will need to use the antibodies (immunoglobulins) that are in it too. Initially the levels of antibodies in colostrum are very high (around four times the levels in the ewe's own blood), but these fall to very

low levels within 18-24 hours, mirrored by the lambs' reducing capacity to absorb them over that time. The ewe has put in a bit of time to make that colostrum, over the last few weeks of pregnancy, and she will make some of it in spite of how badly she is fed. Fat, lactose and antibody concentration are fairly similar between well fed and poorer fed ewes. The rub, however, is in the volume

produced. Properly fed ewes will produce a far greater quantity of colostrum than poorly fed ewes, hence providing enough good stuff for twin lambs (or more).

Ensuring adequate feeding for ewes in the last month of pregnancy is therefore critical, as the effect of the proper feeding builds up over this time. The feed rate can't suddenly be put up a week before lambing and great things expected.

A metabolic profile of the ewes one month prior to lambing will help to validate current feeding and highlight any tweaks needed – particularly with respect to energy and protein consumption and usage. This sampling could coincide with a pre-lambing clostridial vaccine booster

(four to six weeks before lambing), giving more confidence that the vaccine will work properly. Vaccines do not increase the amount of antibodies present in colostrum, but do make them more specific to the diseases to be protected against."

**Richard Knight** is a Director at Westmorland Veterinary Group in Cumbria, Lancs and North Yorks (01539 722692).

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