

Lambing ewes and colostrum quality

As winter marches on and ewes get larger and larger before their expected lambing dates, one thing gradually becomes apparent – at a time when they should be eating more and more, they can actually eat less! **Richard Knight**, Director at the Westmorland Veterinary Group, advises



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As pregnancy advances, then the dry matter intake (DMI) of sheep reduces, mostly through a larger uterus. This can often be more marked at the fat end of the ewe scale, where internal body fat takes up space and can reduce DMI even more.

The energy in grass or even good hay is simply not enough to take her through on a good nutritional plane up until lambing. If this is taken through until its natural conclusion, then she is going to be losing weight before lambing (negative energy balance), which means that the lambs could have a reduced birth weight. She is also at risk of twin lamb disease (pregnancy toxæmia) and the colostrum she produces for her lambs is going to be of both reduced quantity and quality,

“We are always looking for opportunities to work with all advisers”

Going on to early lactation, the knock-on effect of this poor start in life means that lambs will be more prone to conditions such as hypothermia, watery mouth,



dysentery, coccidiosis, pneumonia and clostridial diseases – even if the ewe is vaccinated against clostridial diseases.

Supplementing a ewe with even 150-250g of concentrate feed in the final two weeks before lambing will mean that colostrum quality is improved, so the lamb will benefit from clostridial vaccines the ewe has had through antibodies in the colostrum. Also, she can better utilise any mineral supplements that she has received.

A well-nourished ewe is also going to respond better

to any parasitic challenges such as intestinal worms, and she will also respond better to any worming treatment, should she succumb.

As proactive vets, we are always looking for opportunities to work with all advisers on the farm. A useful service is provided by the University of Edinburgh's vet school. They will analyse blood samples taken a couple of weeks before lambing, which assesses the ewes' energy and protein intakes to determine if there are any areas to be improved upon – reducing problems at a very busy time of year. This

allows a great opportunity for us all to work together to improve the lot of sheep.

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