

Bottle Raising Orphaned Lambs and Kids

The winter and spring lambing and kidding seasons always bring babies in need of extra care. Often called “bummers”, these young animals may be rejected by their mothers or orphaned due to the death of the ewe or doe. They seek to “bum” milk from other females in the herd, but are rarely adopted without human intervention. Although bummers can be successfully raised by hand, taking care of young lambs and kids is quite a lot of work and requires planning ahead and careful attention to feeding schedules.

Colostrum feeding is the single most critical point in a young ruminant’s entire life and must occur as soon as possible after birth (within the first few hours is best, and no later than 24 hours after birth). The first milk produced by the mother, colostrum provides a concentrated source of energy, protein and passive immunity in the form of antibodies which will protect the young animal from infectious agents until its own immune system is functioning. The longer the delay between birth and feeding of colostrum, the poorer the animal's ability to absorb that colostrum will be. Additionally, the quality of the colostrum secreted by the mother rapidly decreases within hours after birthing. Animals orphaned at birth usually do not receive colostrum and often become ill or die within the first few weeks of life.

Because it is such an important factor in the survival of a newborn, you should have a good source of frozen colostrum available if at all possible. Although sheep colostrum may be hard to come by, colostrum can often be obtained from goat dairies and fed to both kids and lambs. When feeding goat colostrum, be sure it comes from goats free of CAEV and Johne’s disease. Cow colostrum is better than none at all, but as it is less concentrated than goat or sheep colostrum a larger quantity must be fed to the orphaned lamb or kid.

Ideally, a lamb or kid should receive 1oz (30ml) per pound of bodyweight of its own mother's colostrum, within 1 hour of birth. Thus a 5lb lamb will be fed 5oz of colostrum at the first feeding. Additionally, 3oz per pound should be divided into small amounts fed every 2 hours within the first 24 hours of life. Waiting several hours after the initial feeding to ensure the baby is hungry before the next feeding will aid in bottle training. If the lamb or kid is unable to nurse on its own you may need to feed with a stomach tube. When feeding kids and lambs with a stomach tube, give no more than 20ml per pound of body weight at each feeding.

After the initial feeding of colostrum you will begin feeding a commercial lamb or kid milk replacer. If you have enough colostrum, gradually mix in milk replacer over the next 24-48 hours. Because of the health problems associated with overfeeding milk replacer, newborns should receive only 10% of their body weight in milk replacer each day for the 5 days of life. Then, gradually increase the daily volume fed to reach 15-20% of body weight during the second week of life. This corresponds with 1.5oz per pound per day during the first 5 days, then 2-3oz per pound per day thereafter. Thus a 5lb lamb should receive 7.5oz per day initially, then 10-15oz per day once it has adjusted to bottle feeding. This daily amount should be divided into several feedings over each 24 hour period. Increase the amount of milk fed and reduce the number of feedings per day as the lamb gains weight and gets older. (See schedule below.)

Feeding newborn lambs and kids over 24 hours old:

Day 2 thru 3: every 3 hours

Day 4 thru 7: every 4 hours

Day 8 thru 21: every 6 hours

Day 21 thru 35: every 8 hours

Day 35 till weaning: every 12 hours.

Begin offering solid feed (alfalfa hay and starter grain)

Consider weaning once lamb/kid weighs 20lbs

*Information provided by: Cotati Large Animal Hospital
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Tips for Success:

1. Do not overfeed. A baby will not be able to digest a large volume properly and this may cause scouring or bloating. The newborn should have an excellent appetite at all times – if it is not hungry for the next feeding it may have been given too much milk at the previous feeding.
2. The risk of bloating can be reduced by feeding cold milk rather than warmed milk. The milk replacer powder still has to be mixed with water at the manufacturer's recommended temperature, then cooled as quickly as possible in a refrigerator. This means you will prepare the milk one feeding in advance of need; that is in the morning for the evening feeding.
3. Under NO CIRCUMSTANCES should you give the lamb cow's milk. If you can't get lamb milk replacer, use goat's milk until you get lamb replacer.

Supplies to have on hand:

Baby scale
Thermometer
Heat lamp or hot water bottles
Teat nipples and empty 12-16oz water bottles
Stomach Tube
60ml syringe with catheter tip
Large cardboard box or dog pen for housing

When to call the vet:

Does not want to nurse or has a decreased appetite
Becomes weak or depressed
Develops watery diarrhea
Rectal temperature below 100 or above 104F

Good reference sources:

Raising Milk Goats the Modern Way by Jerry Belanger
Maryland Small Ruminant Page, www.sheepandgoat.com