

# Lambing

## Information Sheet

### Colostrum at lambing time



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Lambs are born without any antibodies in their blood. Luckily ewe colostrum is a rich source of antibodies so; provided the ewe has a good supply of colostrum, and the lambs suck well soon after birth, they will be temporarily protected against the bugs found on their farm. Without a good intake of ewe colostrum it is difficult for lambs to fight off infections early in life.

More than half of all lamb losses occur in the first 2 days, with watery mouth and hypothermia among the most important causes of death. A good feed of ewe colostrum will provide antibodies to prevent watery mouth, and energy to ward off hypothermia. Any lamb that doesn't receive enough ewe colostrum has an increased risk of dying.

Reasons for insufficient colostrum intake can include inadequate ewe nutrition leading to poor colostrum yield/quality, birth of weak lambs, poor mothering, competition between triplet lambs, or delayed sucking following a difficult lambing. If a high risk lamb is identified then ewe colostrum is the best feed to give.

Goat or cow colostrum are possible alternatives. Goat colostrum has a similar make-up to ewe colostrum, but donor goats should be screened for CAE (Caprine Arthritis Encephalitis Virus) – the goat equivalent of Maedi Visna.



Cow colostrum contains less fat so is lower in energy. Donor cows should be free from Johne's disease and ideally vaccinated against clostridial diseases. Very rarely antibodies in cow colostrum can damage the red blood cells of the lamb causing anaemia and death. Pooling colostrum from several cows will reduce this risk.

Powdered colostrum supplements are expensive but convenient. They will provide lambs with energy to prevent hypothermia, but overall they are not a true substitute for ewe colostrum. A study carried out several years ago compared 14 brands of colostrum supplements to ewe colostrum. It found that in 12 cases a single feed contained less than half the antibodies provided by ewe colostrum. In 7 of these the figure was less than a quarter.

**Lambs that receive colostrum supplements should be monitored carefully for signs of ill health.**