

Bouncin' Babes

Hobby Farms experts give advice on what to expect when you're expecting four-legged babies.

By Carol Ekarius, John Barbagello and Heather Smith Thomas

Spring is truly a joyous time on farms. The grass starts turning green again, the flowers begin to bloom, and for most of us who have breeding animals, spring is when the babies arrive. Birthing season is a period of hard work, but also a period of great reward.

Be Prepared

Birthing is a life or death situation. If you are new to the process, you may ask your vet or experienced breeder to be present at kidding time. If a kidding problem develops, it is too late to call a vet.

Read up on problems and how to deal with them before kidding time. Here are some resources to help.

The Encyclopedia of Country Living

By Carla Emery

Raising Milk Goats the Modern Way

By Jerry Belanger

The Complete Herbal Handbook for Farm and Stable

By Juliette de Bairacli Levy Whether you are looking forward to a foal from your favorite mare, a calf from that nice heifer, some lambs or some kids, there are a few common things to keep in mind: Birthing is a natural process and most animals are capable of doing it without much interference from you. Fretting about them may cause more trouble, as it increases their stress. "Patience is a virtue," as the old saying goes, and that is especially true during birthing time. Observe and help if you must, but try to let nature take its course.

The real key to having happy and healthy babies is having happy and healthy moms. Providing excellent nutrition during pregnancy is the single most important role you play in assuring that your mothers will do their jobs well: Your pregnant and lactating animals need extra water, extra protein and extra energy in their diets, particularly in the last month before birth, to stimulate milk production. However, avoid the common mistake of getting them overly fat, which creates its own set of problems for both mothers and babes. During the last month, the fetus can actually begin to put pressure on internal organs like the stomach (or stomachs in the case of cows, sheep and goats), so feeding smaller portions more frequently is better than feeding one big portion per day.

After babies are born, they need the mother's colostrum as soon as possible. It is full of antibodies that will help them fight off infectious organisms in their environment. If it's not possible to feed the mother's colostrum (due to death, disease or rejection, for example), you can substitute colostrum from another animal (farmers usually keep some frozen for just this purpose) or get a commercial product (available from your vet).

Lambing

Sheep are prolific. Twins are common, triplets aren't uncommon, and for some breeds, quadruplets and quintuplets are a distinct possibility. Mamas that have more than two may not be able to raise them all, so really watch the small lambs from litters to be sure they are growing well. Plan on bottle feeding or grafting, bonding a lamb onto a surrogate mother, if they aren't getting enough to eat. The average gestation for sheep is 148 days; the ewe has a 16-day estrus period.

When to Assist

As a general rule, let a mom go on her own until: She is showing signs of complete exhaustion and seems to be giving up. One front leg and the nose of the baby are both showing, but the other leg isn't. There are two right or two left legs showing (a problem with mixed up twins). The baby is showing, but mom has made no progress in 20 minutes. She has been in obvious labor for a couple hours with no signs of change. (Note: First-time mothers take longer than old timers, so if she seems strong, let her go at least three hours before you intercede.)

There are a few husbandry practices for sheep that can be very helpful if done a few weeks before the ewe's due date. These practices, such as shearing if weather permits, or crotching and facing if it is still a bit wintery, can help keep a clean environment for the newborn lamb and remove obstacles that make it hard for newborns to nurse.

Shearing is completely removing the fleece. Crotching is removing wool from the inner tops of the legs, around the hindquarters, and around the udder; facing (aka wiggling) removes wool from around the face. The advantages of these practices include: Easier to predict when the ewe will give birth. Easier to assist at lambing, if need be. Easier for lambs to find the teats (and keeps them from sucking on dirty wool). Easier for ewes to see their lambs. Less chance of ewes lying on newborns.

As the time approaches, the lamb (or lambs) in the womb will drop, giving the ewe a sway-backed and sunken appearance, and a restless attitude. The ewe will probably be doing some grunting when getting up or lying down. She will pick out a spot to lamb and lie down away from the rest of the sheep, sometimes pawing the ground before lying down. She may get up, paw and lie back down frequently. Look for her vulva to relax and be slightly pinker in the last day or two before parturition. It is common for ewes to have a slight mucous discharge, which can be fairly clear or slightly bloody. Her feeding habits may also change, though ewes have been known to simply walk away from the feed trough and plop out a lamb.

Mom will usually get right to work licking a newborn; if not, wipe the mucous off its nose and place it at the ewe's head right away so she can identify it as her own. A lamb that has difficulty breathing may have excess mucous in the throat and lungs, so grab it securely by the hind legs and give it a couple of aggressive swings—the centrifugal force will usually expel the mucous—making certain its head is clear of any obstacles. If it is somewhat cold and the ewe isn't drying it off well (which often happens when she still has more lambs on the way), you may want to get a towel and help dry off the baby.

Lambs will get up and try to start nursing quickly. If the lamb hasn't been able to find a teat and get milk within about 15 minutes, go ahead and try to assist. Sometimes, this simply requires holding the little one's mouth over the teat. Sometimes it may require taking one or more lambs away and raising them on a bottle (particularly for ewes that have three or more lambs). One sure way to tell if a lamb is actually getting milk is to watch its tail: For lambs that are getting milk, their little tails swing back and forth like a flag in a good breeze. If the tail isn't in motion, you may have a problem. A lamb that is getting milk will also have a puffed-out belly, whereas one that's not has a sunken belly and its skin piles up in folds. Be vigilant for the first two or three days in making sure that all is well.— CE

Kidding

In our barn we have had more than 75 kids born—21 kids last year alone. When labor starts we're prepared for emergencies, but thankfully our help usually isn't needed. Most often we sit spellbound, watching another miracle take place.

After roughly 150 days, a pregnant doe's sides will appear hollow below her lower spine as the first kid is positioning itself for birth. Labor is only hours away. If a doe is panting, bleating or grunting while bearing down, labor has begun. Place the doe in a pen with clean bedding, such as straw, and gather your birthing supplies.

We use two pickle buckets with lids. One is full of clean, old bath towels. The other has rubber gloves, iodine and emergency items such as molasses, plastic bottles with nipples, syringes, reference books and a drench gun. The buckets keep everything sanitary and provide seats while we wait.

A trouble-free birth should take only an hour or so. The doe will likely walk in circles, paw the ground, lie down for contractions and then get up and walk again. When she is effaced and dilated enough to deliver, she will normally lie down to push.

A water bag should appear first, showing both front hooves and a nose. Any different presentation requires intervention. When correctly positioned, the head and front half of the kid should come on one contraction and the rest of the kid on another contraction. Remove mucous from the nose and mouth with your finger even before the second half comes out.

Catch the kid in a towel and check for breathing. The cord will either sever during birth or the doe will chew it off and eat it. Dry the kid to avoid chilling, then transfer it to a clean towel. Dip the cord or navel area in iodine to prevent infection. If the weather is cold, place a two-liter plastic bottle containing hot tap water in the towel to keep the kid warm.

Multiple births are normal and siblings should come quickly, so watch the doe carefully for difficulties. She might pace again or stand to smell and lick the kid.

Help each kid nurse on the doe within 15 minutes of birth. Their first drink is filled with colostrum, which boosts immunity. Nursing also helps the doe to have stronger contractions to deliver the next kid or the placenta. Does may try to eat the

placenta; wild goats instinctively do so to avoid attracting predators.

Finally, give the doe warm water with molasses as an energy booster, then supply food and cool water. Keep doe and kids together in a pen to bond for several days, checking them regularly.

Watch for mothers who reject kids, especially with multiples. She should let each kid nurse fully while sniffing the kid's tail for identification. Make sure the doe is nursed well on both sides to avoid mastitis.

Kids must nurse often to thrive. Observe kids for strong nursing reflexes and help weaker kids eat more frequently.

Kidding time in our barn can be challenging and sometimes tragic. Yet nothing compares to watching, and occasionally helping, the miracle of birth.— JB

Foaling

Gestation length for mares is 335 to 340 days (about 11 months), but this is only an average; mares rarely foal on their "due date" and may foal as much as three to four weeks earlier or later.

A few days or weeks before foaling, her udder will fill with milk. Mild uterine contractions signal the start of early labor, positioning the foal for birth with head and front legs aimed toward the birth canal. The mare may not show much outward sign, but if you are observant you'll notice a change in her attitude.

She may be restless or stand at the far corner of her pasture. The pelvic muscles on either side of her tail will relax fully and she may paw, nose at her flank, switch her tail, or get up and down a few times, but she will be fairly comfortable between contractions.

During second stage labor, however, contractions will come faster and harder with abdominal straining. The mare will show more constant signs of discomfort, getting up and down or just lying down and straining until the foal is born. If she's in a stall, make sure she has plenty of fresh bedding (straw, rather than sawdust, as sawdust can block foal's nasal passages), since she may go down hard when the pains hit.

The water sac will rupture (with a flood of straw-colored fluid rushing from her vulva) or it will emerge from the vulva before breaking. When this happens, the foal should be coming through the birth canal right behind it. A whitish sac should appear within a few minutes, encasing the foal. If this sac is already broken, you'll see the front feet. Once the water bag and/or the feet appear, the foal should emerge quickly, making fast progress each time the mare strains.

If only one foot appears or birth does not progress swiftly, the mare is in trouble and needs assistance immediately. A cow can safely be in active labor for an hour or two and still deliver a live calf, but if a mare takes longer than 20 or 30 minutes, the foal is in danger. A mare is so strong that if a foal is not in the proper position, the pressure of abdominal contractions will kill it, push a hoof through her uterus or tear the birth canal. If the foal is in an abnormal position, you need professional help.

With a big foal, the shoulders must come through the pelvis one at a time. One front foot is usually extended farther than the other. If the mare is having trouble, pull on one front leg to advance it farther and help the shoulders through. Once the shoulders pass, the foal should be born quickly.

Once he's born, the mare will rest for 10 to 20 minutes. The foal should start shaking his head (to free himself of the membrane sac) and breathing, even though his hind feet are still in the birth canal. Make sure the membrane is away from his nose.

Do not pull him out or force the mare to get up. Part of the foal's blood supply is still within the placenta in the uterus, pulsing into him for a few minutes as the mare rests. If the umbilical cord is broken prematurely by the mare jumping up or by your pulling the foal out, he may be weak. Also, the placenta is starting to detach and work its way into the birth canal; if the mare jumps up too quickly, it will fall back into the uterus and the mare will take longer to expel it. After a normal, healthy birth, the placenta will be hanging down when the mare eventually gets up, and she should shed these membranes within a very short time. If she takes longer than an hour or two, this is abnormal and could lead to serious uterine infection. Consult your vet; never try to remove the placenta or it might tear, leaving a piece inside the uterus.— HST

Calving

Gestation length for cows is about 283 days (roughly nine months). Cows are more predictable than mares, usually calving

within a week of their due date.

A few days or weeks before she calves, a cow's udder will fill with milk and the muscles around the vulva will become saggy. Her teats will fill 12 to 24 hours before calving. She is alert and restless as uterine contractions begin. As contractions occur, she may kick at her belly, pace the fence or stall, or lie down. In between, she may continue chewing her cud or eating.

As the cervix dilates, the calf's feet enter the birth canal, stimulating the cow to begin straining with her abdominal muscles; active labor has begun. The membranes and fluids surrounding the calf are often pushed through the birth canal ahead of it. The water bag (a dark purple membrane enclosing straw-colored fluid) may appear at the vulva before breaking, or you may simply see the fluid rushing out.

Occasionally the water bag will come alongside the calf or even behind it.

Once active labor begins, a cow generally lies down and starts hard straining. The amnion sac (whitish membrane) enclosing the calf should appear soon, with front feet inside it. As the feet protrude farther, the calf's nose should be visible. In a mature cow, the calf should be born within minutes of the feet appearing if he is positioned properly. A heifer having a first calf may take longer. If the calf is large, it may take up to an hour of hard labor. If a cow or heifer takes longer than an hour, she needs assistance. If only one front hoof appears, or if two hooves and no head, or hind hooves only appear--or if the cow acts like she's in labor but nothing happens--she needs help to deliver the calf. If a leg or head is turned back, the calf must be pushed back into the uterus where there is room to straighten it out. A backward calf needs to be pulled out to ensure the birth will be swift enough to get him out before he suffocates (since the umbilical cord will be pinched off or broken as his hips come through the cow's pelvis).

In a normal birth, the calf slides out quickly once the head emerges (it may take a few hard strains to pass the head and sometimes the shoulders). The amnion sac should break as he slides out. If it doesn't, pull it away from his head so he can start to breathe. The cow usually gets right up, turns around and starts licking her calf. A first calver may rest for a few minutes before getting up, but a mature cow will immediately stand to take care of her calf, licking off the birth fluids. Her rough licking stimulates him to breathe; if the sac is still over his head, she will usually lick it off and eat it. Her licking also encourages the calf to try to get up and seek the udder for his first nursing.

The final stage of labor involves passing the placenta. The cow continues to have contractions as the placenta detaches and the uterus starts to shrink. The placental membranes will migrate through the birth canal and may hang down after she gets up. She will generally shed the placenta within two to eight hours (and may eat it as soon as she sheds it), but some cows take much longer. Do not pull on the placenta; there will be less risk of complications if you leave it alone. Cows are not as vulnerable to uterine infections from retained placenta as mares, but a cow should be closely monitored until she sheds these membranes. If she goes off feed or develops a fever, she'll need immediate medical help and antibiotics.—HS

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