

Starting Young Nursing Lambs on Feed  
By Kevin G. Burgoon, Ph.D.  
Product Manager/Nutritionist HONOR™ Showfeeds

Getting very young lambs on feed is critical to growth rate and show ring success. The following is a method that has been used successfully by many breeders. It is important to define goals for lamb feeding.

Lambs that will be shown in breeding shows are generally “pushed” to be as growthy as possible. Lambs that are destined for market shows may not require maximum growth. This depends upon the season of the year when shown. For example, February or March lambs that are intended to be shown in August need to grow as quickly as possible, while the same lambs shown in Winter shows (January – February) do not require the explosive early growth.

First, it is important to say just a few things regarding ewes and type of birth. It is a good idea to leave a ewe with her lambs in a lambing jug for at least 3-5 days post lambing. It is valuable to leave her additional days, if the lambing schedule permits. In other words, when the lambing jugs (or pens) are full, and you have another ewe lamb, the ewe with the oldest lambs must be removed to make room. After removing the ewe with lambs, it is a good idea to “group” ewes according to birth type (single, or multiple). The reason for this is simple; ewes with more than one lamb will have much greater nutrient requirements than single birth ewes. If you have room, it pays to feed ewes differently according to the number of lambs they are nursing. Also, it is imperative to deworm ewes by 24 hours after lambing to prevent infection in newly born lambs.

One of the most important aspects of starting lambs on feed is providing a place where the lambs can get to the feed and ewes cannot. This is called a creep feeder. It can be sophisticated and complex, or of simple wooden design. Whatever the form of the creep feeder it just has to work by keeping the ewes away from the creep feed. If you have sufficient room, make the creep feeder large enough to accommodate all the lambs at one time. Remember to look forward and visualize the lambs at 60-70 lbs. and provide sufficient room in the creep feeder for at least 75% of the lambs at this weight. Lambs grow quickly; therefore limiting the size of the creep feeder restricts access to the feed and possibly limits growth.

Some lambs will begin nibbling on feed at a young age, usually at 7-10 days. Young lambs usually like alfalfa hay. It is a good idea to place a small amount of high quality alfalfa hay to entice lambs to enter and begin eating. An excellent method of getting lambs into the feeder and starting to eat, is to offer soybean meal alone in the feeder. Young lambs are very receptive to the taste and flavor of soybean meal, and usually consume it readily. Offer soybean meal alone for the initial 5-7 days. About one week after lambs begin eating, place HONOR Showlamb Starter DX Pellets on top of the soybean meal. Gradually transition the feed offered from soybean meal to HONOR Showlamb Starter DX Pellets over a two week period. Continuing to offer soybean meal for two weeks encourages the smaller younger lambs to enter the creep feeder and begin consuming feed.

It is a good idea to routinely offer high quality alfalfa hay in the creep area. It is also a good idea (if possible) to have the creep area well lighted both night and day. The creep area should be kept clean, dry, and draft freed. Because lambs are generally born from January through April, the weather can be cold and harsh. Offering a clean, warm place not only keeps lambs healthy but encourages them to eat as well. Basically, after lambs start consuming feed, keep the feeder full and let them go at it.

There are a couple of health concerns that must be addressed. Enterotoxemia, or "overeating disease" is caused by *Clostridium perfringens* Types C & D. These are bacteria that normally live in the small intestine of sheep. When lambs begin consuming feedstuffs that are high in crude protein, these bacteria can proliferate extremely fast. The waste products of these bacteria are toxic to the lamb and effect the central nervous system, causing rapid death. The largest, healthiest looking lambs are generally the ones effected first. This is because they are spending a lot of time in the creep feeder. The rapid death of apparently healthy lambs due to this disease is where some people have obtained the urban legend that "a lamb is born looking for a place to die".

Treatment for enterotoxemia is usually fruitless. Prevention is usually the only means of control and therefore a necessity. It is a good idea to vaccinate lambs for overeating before they begin consuming feed. However, some lambs begin eating at 7 days old. This is extremely young to expect vaccination to be effective. Usually, lambs are not consuming sufficient feed to cause bacterial proliferation until they are about 4 weeks of age. You might wish to vaccinate at about 2 weeks of age and then again at 4 weeks of age. It is a very good idea to vaccinate for tetanus at the same time. Several companies make a dual vaccine for both *Clostridium perfringens* Type C&D and *Clostridium tetani*. Remember to use a toxoid vaccine as opposed to an antitoxin. Basically, a toxoid vaccine requires about 2 – 4 weeks to produce full

immunity, while an antitoxin begins working almost immediately but lasts only about 2 weeks. So, if lambs have started on feed, and your region or area has a history of overeating, it is a good idea to give the antitoxin initially, followed by the toxoid vaccination in two to three days. Repeat the toxoid vaccination in two weeks. Keeping lambs healthy is the secret to rapid growth. You may also wish to deworm lambs at about 6 weeks of age as well, even while still nursing.