

KEEPING AN EYE ON YOUR POSTPARTUM FEMALES

By *Jessy Shanks*

Lambing and kidding is a special event throughout the winter and spring season for most small ruminant producers. Up until this point, a lot of time and money has been invested in selecting suitable rams and bucks, breeding your females, and ensuring that they get adequate nutrition and care until their lambing/kidding date. We invest so much money as small ruminant producers, it makes sense to follow this process through until the very end. However, a female's productive life does not end with lambing or kidding. We hope this is merely the beginning of a long successful career. The process of giving birth is quite a big change for females, but there are a few things we can do to ensure that our ewes and does remain productive and healthy. This way they can remain in the flock/herd and raise healthy offspring for years to come.

We spend a lot of time making sure newborn lambs and kids get off to the right start once they are born. They enter the world and want just a few key things, nutrition and warmth. The ewe or doe should see to this and make it easy for the producer. She does all of the work for us, and if she doesn't, then it's time to make a note about her lack of mothering skills. Once the lamb or kid is taken care of, the female also has to take care of herself, and this is where we can ensure that she remains a productive part of the flock/herd. Shortly after birth we need to make sure she has passed her placenta. You should find this in the jug within a few hours, but if it has been longer than 24 hours or so, please consult your veterinarian for guidance on what to do next.

We all know that most goats and sheep are always ravenously hungry, so when they don't eat it raises a red flag. Your female should start eating and drinking pretty quickly after

giving birth so make sure she has access to both feed/hay and water. Most females begin eating quickly while some take a little while, but if you notice that she is not eating at all, this is cause for concern. There are several reasons why a female may not eat. Did she have a difficult time giving birth? Did you have to pull the lamb/kid? Were there multiples that required more assistance than normal? All of these items factor in to how her postpartum experience will go and how she might feel. Monitor her intake for several days after birth. This is made easier by using lambing/kidding jugs so you know exactly how much she is eating and drinking. Not to mention they help with bonding and keeping the little ones safe. If she goes off feed take her temperature, which should be between 100.9-103.8°F for sheep and 101.3-103.5°F for goats. If it is elevated call your veterinarian for advice on what to do next. She could have a uterine infection (metritis) or there might be another reason for her elevated temperature. Early detection is key in this case and could help both you and her immensely.

Another item to keep an eye on is whether or not she is getting up and moving around regularly. It's easy to go in the barn and see that she is laying down and assume that all is fine, but if she isn't up, then the lamb or kid cannot nurse as effectively. Again, check her temperature and get your veterinarian's advice. What about her udder? Mastitis can creep up unnoticed if her udder is not getting nursed so also be sure to feel her udder and check for heat/cold, swelling, or discoloration. Any of these signs warrant a call to your



veterinarian for quick intervention.

Noticing these small clues can mean the difference between a healthy ewe/doe or a sick one that might die or have to be culled. You may believe that all of this is well known information, but as sheep and goat producers we can often get caught up in the everyday tasks of lambing/kidding and forget about the little things. I have been guilty of this myself sometimes, but with careful note taking, prevention in the form of good nutrition and health care, and early intervention we can make sure our females have the best possible chance for recovery. If you have any questions, please contact your Extension agent, local veterinarian, or myself at jharri50@utk.edu or 865-974-4160.

Jessy Shanks is the Small Ruminant and Youth Programs Specialist at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Jessy raises Southdown and Dorper sheep with her husband and daughter just below Knoxville. Her background is in reproductive physiology and she enjoys teaching producers and youth about small ruminants in any way possible.