



“One Hoof & A Nose”

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You're at the barn at feeding time and a ewe you've been watching for a few days has decided that now is the time to go into labor. About an hour goes by and it's apparent that she is in the first stage of lambing, just getting ready and hopefully dilating her cervix. You continue your chores and decide that those lambs aren't coming within the hour.

A tactic that is often underused is to leave her alone for a while. After all privacy is usually the preferred status of females in labor. After about an hour, she is now laying down and actively pushing, again you give her some time to see how she progresses. It's now been an additional 30 minutes and she isn't making any headway with getting these lambs out. After a quick exam, you see that one hoof and a nose is sticking out.

According to the ultrasound by your veterinarian 2

months ago, this particular ewe is pregnant with twins. So, you automatically fear that one leg is from one lamb and the nose from another. Gloves are found, you tie the ewe up, and prepare to find out what is going on. After some exploration you find that this is exactly what you were afraid of.

This is problematic for several reasons, but the most obvious reason is because of physics, both of these lambs cannot come out at once. The birth canal is fairly narrow, and her body just will not allow it. Another problem is that she has already been in labor for a few hours. So, you know your time is running out. You then ask yourself, just when do I need to call the veterinarian? This is a common question that I get from producers. My answer typically starts with, you call the veterinarian when you feel that you need to, or you know your limitations have been exceeded. It's all about your comfort level and ultimately achieving the


goal of getting live lambs or kids out of the equation, along with a healthy ewe/doe.

It is extremely important to have an established relationship with a veterinarian in your area prior to lambing/kidding season. This relationship is invaluable for livestock producers because veterinarians help us keep our animals healthy, while also helping to maintain a safe food supply. A veterinarian that knows you and your animals is also more likely to be able to assist in emergency situations because that is part of the veterinary client patient relationship (VCPR). Your veterinarian has an intimate working knowledge of your farm and your animals. In the case above, this producer needs to know what his/her limitations are as far as assisting with lambing. I talk to some producers that are squeamish and I talk to some that don't mind all the blood, urine, and feces that can accompany a difficult birth. If you feel comfortable with trying to deliver the lambs or kids then go ahead and try.

My rule of thumb for myself is to always palpate when I suspect a difficult birth. Do this with GLOVED hands (no exceptions here!) and plenty of lube. I use a palpation sleeve and a latex glove on top for grip. When palpating I visualize what I am feeling inside the ewe and then try to move the lambs into position from that image I create in my mind. Your goal is to get them in position so their head and both front legs can be pulled out first. Imagine yourself diving into a swimming pool type of position. Most of the time with plenty of lube, and some external assistance from my husband, I can get most lambs out. The difficult decision you must make as a producer is when do you stop trying and call the veterinarian? Do you try for 15 minutes and give up? Or do you try for 6 hours and end up with dead lambs and a dead ewe? Without question you do not try for 6 hours, that would be crazy, right? However, if I palpate a ewe and know within 15 minutes that this lamb is huge and she needs a c-section, then I'm going to call the veterinarian right away. The quicker a c-section is done, the higher the probability that you will end up with live, healthy lambs/kids. It all depends on what situation you have and what your level of comfort is with trying to assist. If you don't have a veterinarian within 3 hours of you, then you better get comfortable quickly with pulling and delivering lambs/kids.

Refer to the decision tree graphic shown here that I created to help you make the decision of should you call the veterinarian or not. This is only to be used as a rule of thumb and not absolute scientific fact, but it might help to have it handy during lambing or kidding season. I will say I have never regretted calling my veterinarian in the case of a difficult birth. Has it always resulted in live lambs? Not necessarily, but at the end of the day I knew that I had done everything within reason to ensure that the ewe and lamb/lambs had the best possible chance. 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.



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