

# ALBERTA SHEEP

## Early Weaning Protocol

Many producers choose to wean their lambs early to maximize growth rates in an intensive feeding system, or to return ewes to breeding condition quickly in an accelerated lambing program. With early weaning it is essential to minimize the risk of mastitis in your ewes. High producing flocks, with heavily milking ewes, are at an increased risk of developing mastitis problems if weaning is not carefully planned and managed.

As a general rule of thumb, for weaning at any age, it is essential to minimize the stress on the lambs. Wait for good weather, if possible, and avoid weaning on days that are too hot or too cold, wet or rainy. In addition it is good practice to remove the ewes from the pen rather than moving the lambs to a new pen. This maintains familiar surroundings for the lambs, as they already know where the feed and water are located. Ewes should be moved far enough away to be out of hearing range of the lambs if your facilities will allow.

For an early weaning system to work, the lambs must be well started on good quality forage and free choice creep feed. Otherwise the stress of suddenly adapting to dry feed will be too much for them, and setbacks, or even deaths can occur. It is best if routine procedures such as deworming or vaccinating of lambs are completed several days prior to weaning to minimize stress.

1. Wean at an average of eight weeks of age or when youngest lamb is
  - six weeks old,
  - a minimum of 30 lb. (for averaged sized breeds), or
  - eating one lb. solid feed/day.
2. One to two weeks prior to weaning
  - stop feeding grain/concentrates to ewes.
3. Two weeks prior to weaning
  - replace good hay for ewes with poor quality hay.
4. One day prior to weaning
  - restrict access to water to
    - no water for 24 hours, then allow access for a few hours so all can drink,
    - no water for a further 24 hours if necessary,
    - be cautious in very hot weather.
5. Restrict access to feed
  - feed only very small amounts of poor hay for 24 to 48 hours,
  - maintain on poor feed for up to a week if necessary.



After weaning closely observe ewes for excessive udder fill and mastitis at least twice daily

- some very heavy producers may require stripping out,
- closely observe lambs to be sure eating/drinking,
- return to normal maintenance diet once udders begin to soften again.

Remember that every management system is different, and you may need to make adjustments for your individual flock. How long you need to restrict feed and water intake for will depend on the breed and age of ewe, how many lambs she is raising, and how old the lambs are. Contact your veterinarian or other sheep specialist if you have questions about weaning your lambs.

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