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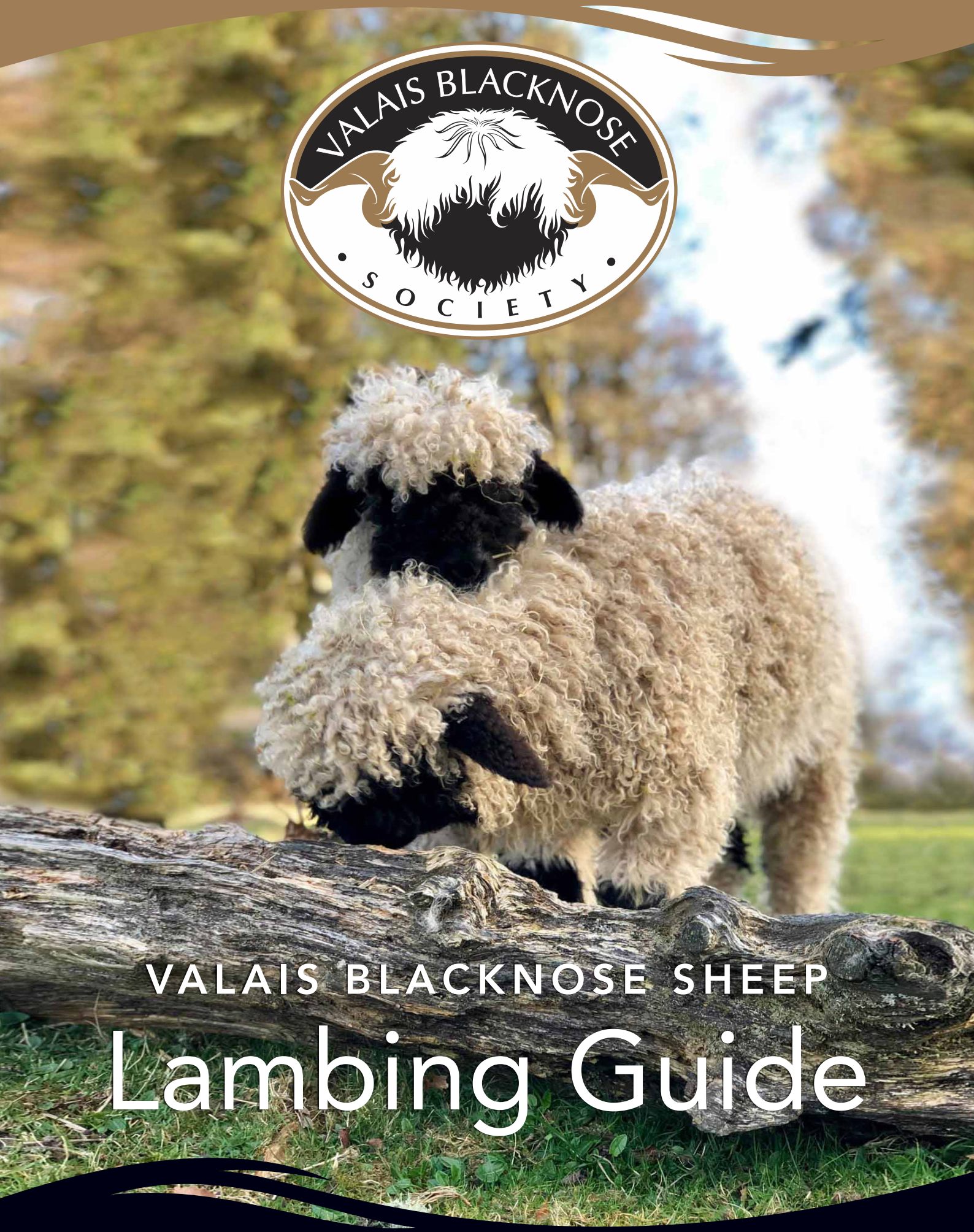

VALAIS BLACKNOSE SHEEP
Lambing Guide

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VALAIS BLACKNOSE SHEEP

LAMBING GUIDE

ARE YOU READY FOR LAMBING SEASON?

Being well prepared is essential for a successful lambing season, here are some things to consider in the count down to the busiest time of the year.

1. Pay attention to pregnant ewe nutrition

Keeping your ewes in top condition for the last six weeks before lambing should be your number one priority. 70% of foetal growth takes place during this period, so if you get feeding wrong, it can have serious consequences for both ewe and lamb. To maximise the potential of high lamb survival rates, good birth weights and quality ewe colostrum, it's recommended to group-feed ewes according to their scanning results and condition score. You can also ask your vet to take blood samples from ewes, four to six weeks prior to lambing, to ensure their diet is delivering all their nutritional needs so that you can adjust if necessary.

2. Check your flock health

Disease prevention is essential vaccinating ewes against clostridial diseases will give lambs a better chance of survival. Don't forget the booster 4-6 weeks pre-lambing.

3. Get your housing facilities ready

- ***Lambing sheds:*** should be clean, drained and well ventilated but draught free. Ensure there is adequate lying area for ewes (1.3m^2 average) and easy access to water and feed.

- ***Lambing pens:*** each pen should be a minimum size of 2m x 1m. You need to provide a hay rack, feed and a small water bucket/automatic bowls in each pen, avoid using large water buckets as there is always a chance that a newborn lamb could drown. Every pen should be cleaned, disinfected and new bedding provided between each ewe.

- ***Hospital facilities:*** organise an intensive care unit for weak lambs. The hospital area should be away from the main lambing area, with access to hot water and a power supply. Lambs which are to be artificially reared should be healthy and not kept in the hospital area.

- ***Isolation pens:*** isolation pens are essential. By isolating sick animals from healthy ones, some protection is given against the spread of potential infectious disease.

4. Check and replenish your lambing toolkit

The lambing toolkit needs to be well stocked and all equipment should be clean and accessible. Useful items are lubricant, disposable gloves, disinfectant, markers/tags, iodine solution, glucose solution, electrolytes, infra-red lamps, a warming box, prolapse harnesses and lambing ropes. Speak to your vet about appropriate drug use, but do make sure that sterile needles, tape, sterile syringes, antibiotics, and anti-inflammatories are included in your kit.

5. Stock up on feeding equipment

Ensure you have spare colostrum and good quality milk replacer on stand-by for orphan lambs and poor doers. Colostrum can be fresh or frozen ewe's colostrum, bovine colostrum or a colostrum substitute. You'll need teated bottles/buckets/troughs for feeding milk. Stomach tubes may be required for weaker lambs. For preparing milk replacer accurately you'll need scales, thermometer and a whisk. All feeding equipment should be cleaned daily and disinfected twice weekly.

HOUSING

When to house your pregnant ewes:

Housing ewes for less than 3 weeks before lambing should be avoided as any sudden changes in diet in the final stages of pregnancy, unless managed carefully, can induce metabolic disorders such as hypocalcaemia or twin lamb disease. Be aware that housing ewes for an extended period (more than a month) requires careful management as it can lead to a build-up of disease such as lameness. It will also add considerable bedding costs.

Good pen layouts feeding, and watering stations are essential to ensure ewes receive a fair allocation of concentrates, unlimited access to forage and fresh water. Ideally group sized pens should be limited to a maximum of 50 ewes per pen.

Grouping

Ewes should be grouped according to their feeding needs, considering body condition score and scanned lamb expectancy. To avoid bullying and if space permits, younger ewes should ideally be penned together and not mixed with older ewes.

Once ewes lamb in the group pens, they should then be moved into an individual lambing pen. The lamb's navel must be treated with iodine as soon as possible to minimise disease issues. Check the ewe's udder and give lambs colostrum if required.

Avoid lambing ewes in small pens to keep bedding as clean and dry as possible. Any wet straw and afterbirth should be cleaned out and fresh clean straw provided between ewes to reduce mismothering and disease issues. Putting lime on the bottom of pens can also help keep them dry and minimise disease.

SHEEP LAMBING SIGNS

- ***Bagging Up*** - Your ewe will start to develop an udder about 4 weeks prior to lambing. As due dates approach, watch their udder closely - within 24 hours the udder will become firm and teats will become large, swollen and filled with milk. This is a clear sheep lambing sign.

- ***Sunken Loin*** - 1-2 days prior to your sheep lambing the lambs will "drop" inside the ewe, offering the appearance of sunken cavities between her hipbones and last rib. This happens as the lambs move into position for delivery and is a clear sign of lambing.

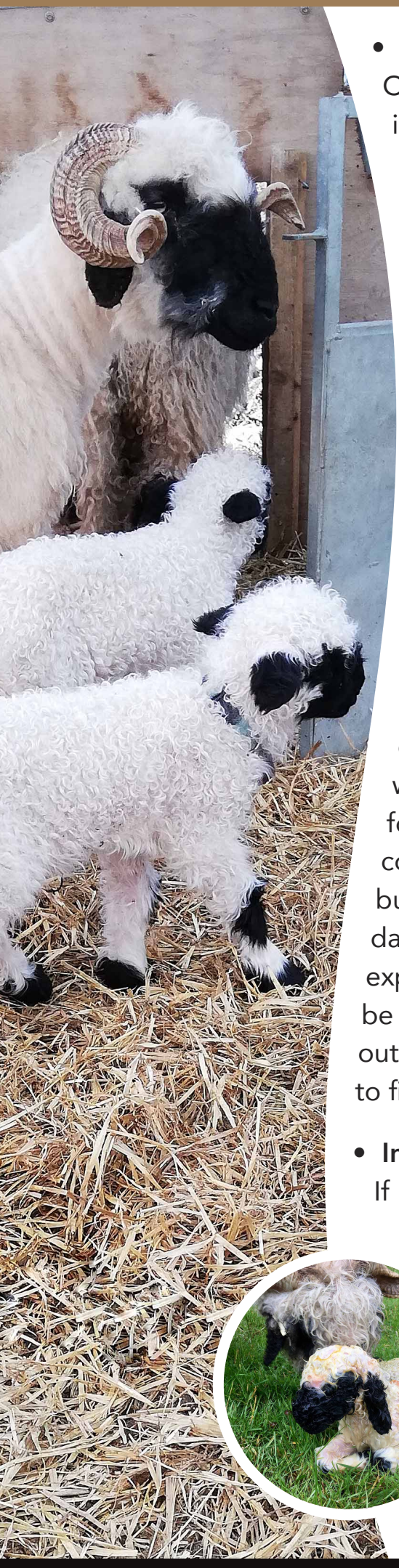
- ***Not Eating*** - Immediately before lambing it's common for many ewes to skip a meal and separate herself from the flock. Missing a meal is no issue but if your ewe/s misses several meals you should consult your vet.

- ***Nesting*** - Just before your ewe begins labour it's common that she will seek out a secluded area and begin pawing at the ground. Some ewes paw gently while others will create huge mounds of bedding to create a welcoming area for delivery. This is usually one of the last sheep lambing signs before your ewe goes into the final stages of labour.

- ***Passing a Water Bag*** - Typically your ewe will pass at least one water bag. When this happens, you know labour has begun and the first lamb should be delivered anytime within an hour. Timings will vary from ewe to ewe and you will need to make judgement calls based on the presentation of each individual animal and assist if required.

Lambing problems

Even with all the right tools and plenty of experience, lambing season can still be a particularly challenging time. There are so many things that can go wrong to complicate a lamb's birth which often require some sort of intervention.



- **Incorrect presentations**

One of the most common birthing issues among sheep is incorrect presentation, there are multiple ways in which unborn lambs can get themselves tangled up and in the wrong position.

If an ewe has been straining for a while and you have seen nothing at all, no water bag, nose or toes, you might be dealing with a severe incorrect presentation such that the poor lamb is not even at the top of the birth canal, or you might simply have a very large lamb that is in the right position but just too big to come out. If you see a water bag and maybe just a nose (and no toes) or toes (and no nose), or just the one toe, you may have something as simple as one leg bent back or, in the case of no nose, a backwards or breech birth (i.e. it is the back feet you can see, not the front).

The key with all of this is time and activity. If the expectant mums stops all activity or keeps straining, but with no joy, you must to decide whether to assist or call for support from your vet. There are all sorts of considerations here: if the water bag burst a while ago but the lamb is still in the birthing canal, they are in danger of breathing in the birthing fluid; if the ewe is expecting twins and lamb number one is stuck, what might be happening to lamb number two; if lamb number one is out, where is the second lamb? The decision to intervene to find out what is going on must not be taken too hastily.

- **Intervention**

If intervention is required, you must still work 'with' your ewe. If you have had to do something as simple as correct a bent leg, or you have worked out that the lamb is rather large but with your help should still hopefully be able to come out naturally, then if and when you help by pulling, do so when mum is having her next contraction. If you pull whilst the ewe is having a rest between contractions, then at best your

pulling will have no effect and at worst really hurt her and possibly damage the newborn. Similarly, if she obviously wants to shift to get into a more comfortable position, let her. Of course, if time gets to be a critical factor, you might just have to get down to it and get the lamb out for the sake of all concerned. In some circumstances, your vet should be able to give you advice over the phone rather than coming out so that a resolution is reached more quickly.

- **Caesarean Section**
  There will be occasions when an incorrect presentation or a large lamb or kid may well require a caesarean – which, of course, should only be done by a vet. A top tip is that when setting up your lambing shed, you should try to create a space for a vet to be able to work as cleanly and securely as possible, just in case you need it to and can't get to the vets directly.

- **Bonding issues**
  Unfortunately, a difficult birth can sometimes lead to post-birth difficulties too. This is not always the case, but sometimes the ewe might be too tired or too traumatised to start to take care of her newborn; if so, you need to help to get the lamb dry and suckling. It is important to do all you can to try to ensure mum accepts her newborn and wants to look after it. This is for a variety of reasons, mainly to do with the fact it is healthier for the animals but also for you in terms of workload.

Turn out

If ewes and lambs are fit and healthy and the weather permits, they should be turned out 24-48 hours post-lambing. Keeping animals housed longer than necessary increases the risk of disease.

CARING FOR YOUR NEWBORN LAMBS

Newborn lambs are very vulnerable but why?

- There is no transfer of antibodies across the placenta in ruminants. This means lambs are born with no protection against disease and are reliant on colostrum for passive immunity.

- Newborn lambs have a very permeable gut lining that can allow any ingested bacteria and toxins into the blood stream. Slow gut movements during the first day of life give ingested bacteria more time to establish and multiply.

- They have limited energy reserves. All lambs are born with a finite amount of brown fat within their bodies, which acts as a stopgap between birth and the time when a lamb can feed.

- Newborn lambs have a large surface area to body weight ratio which makes them susceptible to heat loss. This means they lose heat at a much higher rate when they are wet than when they are dry.

Survival

The ability to survive is largely dependent on the response of the lamb to the climatic environment into which it is born. Lambs are born wet, often into cold or wet conditions and with limited energy reserves. There is a high energy demand to maintain body temperature, and this must be supplied by efficient metabolism of their brown fat and by the ability of the lamb to stand and suckle to obtain milk.

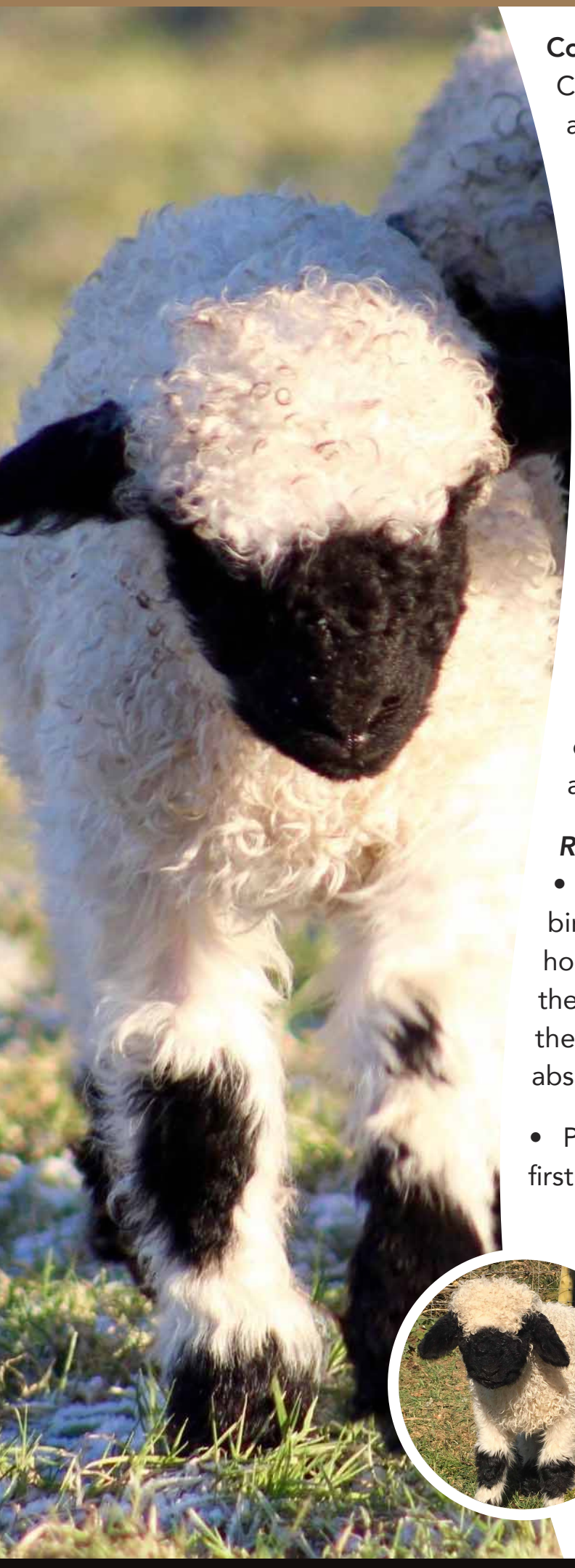
Any lambs that do not feed within the first few hours after birth will soon run out of energy reserves to keep warm, and will die very rapidly if there is no intervention, regardless of the environment they are born into.

Hypothermia and starvation

Hypothermia and starvation are the two principal causes of early lamb mortality. To maintain its body temperature, the newborn lamb must produce as much heat as it is losing to the environment. If the lamb cannot do this, its body temperature will start to fall. Hypothermia (chilling) is a condition where the lamb's body temperature drops below that required for normal metabolism and body function (below 38.5˚C). If not remedied, it can lead to death. In newborn lambs, hypothermia usually results from exposure. In lambs over 24 hours old, hypothermia is usually a result of starvation. Starvation can be caused by many factors such as inadequate intake of colostrum, rejection by the ewe, mastitis, inadequate milk production, injury or illness and/or a difficult birth. Careful and regular shepherding is crucial to ensure that lambs have received adequate food and to spot lambs in difficulty early and treat them as needed.

Here are some top tips to give your lambs the best start in life:

- Make sure the lamb can be identified with its mother and is well bonded.
- Check the lamb is dry.
- Treat the navel cord within15 minutes of birth.
- Check the lamb has suckled and ingested sufficient colostrum.
- Check the ewe has an adequate milk supply.
- Avoid unnecessary interference.
- Ensure good hygiene.
- Typical lamb behaviour is to stretch when they get up, ears should be alert, and they should readily seek the udder. Lambs that cry, stand around hunched up, or simply don't get up most likely need more to eat.



Colostrum

Colostrum is the newborn lamb's first feed and the key to survival. It is a highly nutritious energy source which helps the lamb to maintain body temperature and survive; it also contains antibodies which are vital to help protect against disease.

Access to sufficient and good quality colostrum immediately after birth will reduce losses from both hypothermia and disease.

While mothers' colostrum is preferable, if ewe colostrum is unavailable, in short supply or of poor quality then colostrum must be fed quickly from another source. Options include fresh or frozen colostrum from another ewe, bovine colostrum or a high quality natural alterative.

Remember to:

- Feed colostrum as soon as possible after birth – preferably 250mls within the first 2 hours (no later than 6 hours). This is when the gut wall is most permeable, allowing for the large antibody molecules to be absorbed directly into the bloodstream.

- Provide small frequent feeds during the first 24 hours.

- Colostrum should be fed warm (39°C). It should be warmed by standing in a bowl of warm water. Do not microwave colostrum or heat it directly. Temperatures above 45°C can damage the sensitive proteins within colostrum.

Managing foster lambs

Unfortunately, there may be instances whereby orphaned or rejected lams need to be adopted onto another ewe or artificially reared. Managing these situations will depend on the availability of a suitable foster mother and the foster lamb's physical condition. Fostering will only be successful if the lamb is fit and healthy, has had adequate colostrum, and is fostered onto a healthy ewe with plenty of milk and good maternal instincts. Lambs can also be successfully reared artificially however a good quality milk replacer is essential.

Key pointers for artificially rearing lambs:

- ***Colostrum:*** Ensure lambs receive a sufficient colostrum feed within 6 hours of birth.

- ***Choose your feeding system:*** This will be dependent on the number of lambs you are rearing and your availability. Bottle feeding can be time consuming and often ad-lib feeding addresses the time constraints. Regardless of which system you opt for hygiene is critical as shared teats can lead to the easier spread of disease, therefore all feeding equipment should be cleaned daily and disinfected twice weekly.

- ***Feed milk replacer:*** Milk replacer is a complete diet which will provide lambs with all the energy and nutrients they need. It is very important that you follow the manufacturers feeding instructions to accurately prepare your feed.

As a society we always recommend you consult your veterinary practice for specific health and care advice and plans.