



Practical guide to rearing lambs



This guide will assist you with the basics of rearing a lamb to ensure they have the best start. If you have any concerns about the health of your lamb, please contact your local veterinarian.

Produced by the Ministry for Primary Industries (MPI) with support from:



Best practice guidelines

It is important newborn lambs receive at least two days of colostrum (first milk from the ewe). Colostrum provides protection from diseases. A healthy lamb that is ready to be hand reared should be lively and alert with clear, bright eyes and a small, dry navel.

Facilities

When rearing lambs, it’s important to provide them with a warm, clean, dry, and draught-free environment.

These are some things to consider to make sure lambs get off to a good start.

Housing	The shed used to rear lambs should be closed in on three sides and face away from the prevailing wind. Good ventilation is essential.
Bedding	Straw, shavings, or sawdust.
Water	Clean drinking water should be available at all times.
Ad lib fibre	Straw or hay should be available from day one.
Meal	Provide access to meal from day one. Ensure there is enough room so all lambs can access the feeder. 30cm per lamb of feeding space is recommended after weaning.
Space	If you are rearing multiple lambs, a group size of 10–12 lambs is recommended and 0.5m ² of space is required per lamb. Solid partitions between lamb pens are recommended. If there is room, place a hay bale in the pen for the lambs to rest against.
Warmth	Wool covers can be used for small or unwell lambs.
Access to the outdoors	When the weather allows, lambs will enjoy access to pasture. Giving them the freedom to choose between pasture and their indoor pen is ideal.

If you are keeping your lamb inside your house, careful attention to hygiene is important. Wash your hands after handling the lamb and promptly clean up any soiling.

Feeding

If possible, lambs should be fed colostrum (first milk) from ewes within the first 24 hours of life. This will provide them with protection from common infections for up to three months. If colostrum from ewes is not available, they should be fed a commercial colostrum replacer.

Milk powder

Lambs should be fed a milk powder specifically formulated to meet their needs. Lamb milk powders with a casein content of 20% are recommended. Mixing and feeding instructions are provided on the bag and should be followed closely. Once milk is made up, it should be kept in a refrigerator. This can be fed straight from the fridge, or if your lamb is small, leave the milk on the bench for 15 minutes prior to feeding. If feeding warm milk (no more than 37°C) then this should be yoghurtised.

Avoid sudden changes in the type (brand), quantity or temperature of milk or milk powder, and thoroughly clean bottles/feeders and teats after each feed.

How much to feed your lamb

Lambs should be weighed once a week. This can easily be done using bathroom scales. Weigh yourself, then pick up the lamb and weigh both yourself and the lamb. The difference is the weight of the lamb. The feeding rate is 15% of the lamb's weight. For example, a 5kg lamb needs to be fed a total of 750ml of milk per day spread out over at least three feeds.

Age of lamb	Daily feeding frequency
1–2 days	6 feeds
3–7 days	4 feeds
1–3 weeks	3 feeds
3–6 weeks	2–3 feeds
Over 6 weeks	1–2 feeds

Don't let lambs drink too much milk in one feed. A maximum volume of 350ml per feed is recommended. If you have multiple lambs of different ages, feed each one according to its weight. If children are feeding lambs, they need to be supervised to ensure lambs are not overfed and that bottles are held so lambs are drinking the milk rather than sucking air.

Meal

Nutritional value of meals can vary. Use meal with a minimum protein content of 18%. Meal should be available from day one. Keep it fresh and top it up twice a day. Make sure that other animals, such as dogs and horses, can't access or eat the meal. Some lamb meals contain medications to prevent coccidiosis (a form of scours) and are toxic to other animals.

Weaning

Lambs can be weaned off milk when they are eating 200g/day of meal or when they weigh around 15–18kg. This is usually between 6–8 weeks of age. Do this by reducing both the volume of milk and number of feeds per day over a period of 1–2 weeks.

Lambs will be noisy and demanding during this time, so patience is required. Meal should be available for feeding ad lib for at least 3–4 weeks after lambs are weaned off milk. Then they can be transitioned off meal onto pasture/forage diets. Lambs will eat more meal and grass once they are weaned.

Lambs can eat the same grass as adult livestock and should graze in paddocks, not on lawns or in gardens. Lawns are unlikely to provide enough grass for lambs as they grow and if there is also access to gardens, they may eat poisonous plants. Lambs will also eat house plants, which can be toxic, and fabric, such as clothes hung out to dry and cushions on outdoor furniture.



Recipe to make yoghurtised milk

Makes enough to feed three lambs for about three days.

1. Into a large bucket (10 litres) containing 3L of warm water, add 1kg of lamb milk powder. Mix well (with a whisk or hand mixer) until the powder has dissolved and there are no lumps.
2. Add 200ml of plain unsweetened acidophilus yoghurt (available from your supermarket) and mix thoroughly.
3. Put the lid on the bucket and place it in a warm place such as a hot water cupboard overnight, or for 12+ hours. Keeping the bucket warm and insulated will speed up the fermentation process. Wrapping a hot water bottle around the bucket and insulating it with towels can speed up the process.
4. After about 12 hours (this may take longer if bucket has cooled down), the milk should look and smell like yoghurt. If it doesn't look like yoghurt yet, leave it for longer (consider adding a fresh hot water bottle to keep the contents warm).
5. Once the batch of milk has become yoghurt, remove 200ml from the bucket and keep in the fridge (clearly labelled so no one in the family eats it!) to use as the 'starter' to add to the next batch of milk.
6. Add enough cold water to the bucket to bring the volume up to the 8L mark and mix thoroughly.
7. The yoghurtised milk is now ready to be fed to lambs at normal quantities based on the age of the lambs.
8. Each batch of yoghurtised milk will last for five days when kept in a cool place. Always check that it smells good (like yoghurt) and discard if it starts to smell 'off'.
9. Remember to make up a new batch 24 hours before it will be needed.

Health and wellbeing

Contact your local veterinarian once you get your lamb. They will be able to give you advice to keep your lamb happy and healthy. Prevention is the best approach to health management in lambs. Often once they get sick the chances of a full recovery are poor.

To find a veterinarian in your area go to nzva.org.nz/public/find-a-vet

Common health conditions to look out for

Inflammation of the eyes	Caused by infection or eyelids turning under.
Naval infections	If untreated these can spread and cause more widespread infection such as joint infections.
Mouth sores	Can be painful and prevent feeding. One cause is scabby mouth. This is also infectious to people. Washing hands after handling the lambs is important, especially for children.
Pneumonia	Lambs will have a temperature, cough, and shortness of breath. This may need treating with antibiotics and anti-inflammatories from a veterinarian.
Foot scald	A condition where the skin between the claws becomes inflamed, which can lead to an infection that will smell bad.
Scours	This can be caused by nutritional factors or infections. Careful feeding and keeping equipment used to feed lambs and pens clean will reduce the risk of scours.

A number of infections and diseases of lambs can also affect people, so personal hygiene is important. Always wash hands after handling and cleaning up after lambs. Wear boots and overalls when handling lambs. Clean these items regularly and take them off before entering living areas.

Wet, cold, floppy lambs

Lambs picked up after a storm, or that have been rejected by their mothers – especially the smallest in a set of triplets – are often cold, wet, and lacking in energy. They will appear floppy. In addition to warming these lambs up carefully, they need food to give them energy to warm up. In many cases, these lambs have been rejected by their mothers because they are not well, so a plan for their ongoing care should be discussed with your veterinarian.

Abomasal bloat

This is one of the most common causes of death in reared lambs. Even with prompt treatment the prospect for recovery is poor. Lambs will have a swollen belly and be dull and lethargic. Abdominal pain and teeth grinding, which is a sign of pain, are common. The onset can be rapid, within 30 minutes of feeding, and sometimes lambs are found dead.

Common risk factors are:

- infrequent milk feeding
- overfeeding
- improper mixing of milk powder
- milk that is too hot
- feeding too rapidly
- poor hygiene.

Urgent veterinary attention is essential so you should contact your veterinarian for advice as soon as you notice the lamb is bloated.



Vaccination and drenching

All lambs need to be vaccinated to protect them from common diseases. Orphan lambs need to receive a vaccination for tetanus and pulpy kidney. All lambs should be vaccinated for clostridial diseases and leptospirosis at four weeks of age. Seek veterinary advice for the best ongoing vaccination programme for your lamb.

Parasite management, for both internal and external parasites, is dependent on the risk factors, which can vary between farms and regions. Consult your veterinarian for advice and information about symptoms, risks and the most appropriate treatment or prevention options. Be wary of accepting drench from a well-meaning friend as this may not be an effective treatment for your lambs. Lambs must always be weighed prior to drenching to ensure that the correct dose is given.

Planning for the future

As lambs grow, they will need ongoing care. Adult sheep can live for more than 10 years. This care needs to include shearing and foot care, as well as routine vaccinations, disease prevention measures (e.g. facial eczema) and drenching. Your veterinarian can help you make a plan to ensure your lambs and sheep remain healthy and comfortable.

Tail docking and castration of lambs should be considered to make ongoing management easier. These procedures are painful for the lamb. Getting your veterinarian to carry them out means pain relief can be provided and is a great opportunity to get an overall health check for your lambs.

Sheep behaviour

Sheep are flock animals and are much happier if they have company of other sheep. It is also worth noting that pet lambs grow into sheep with very little fear of people. This can make them dangerous to handle as they may charge or jump up at people. Care should be taken, and children should never be left unsupervised with them.

Homekill

If you are intending to rear your lambs to provide meat for your family, you should contact a reputable homekill business to carry out the slaughter and dressing of your animals. It is important that this is done hygienically to ensure the meat is safe to eat.

Please see the MPI website for more details: mpi.govt.nz/homekill



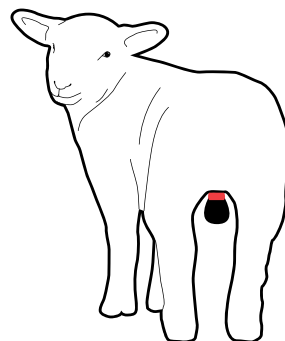
Castration and tail docking

Castration and tail docking are painful procedures and careful consideration should be given when deciding whether these are appropriate for your situation.

Castration

Castration may be carried out when there are significant advantages to animal management, e.g. managing aggression and preventing breeding.

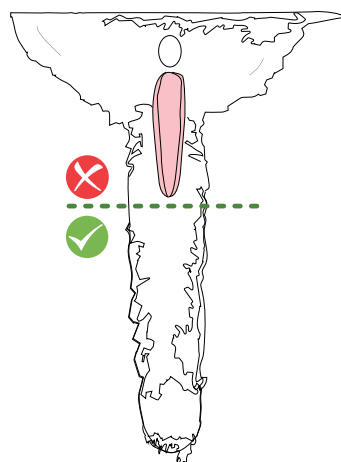
Castration is painful at any age and pain relief is always recommended. You must use pain relief when castrating sheep over six months old, or if using a high tension band at any age. Use of rubber rings is the preferred method.



Tail docking

Tail docking is carried out for a variety of animal health and management reasons, including to prevent faecal soiling, dag formation, flystrike, and to make dagging, crutching, and shearing easier and safer to perform.

- When tail docking lambs under six months old, you must use a rubber ring or hot iron. Don't dock any shorter than the distal end of the caudal fold – this is the point where the two folds of skin attach on the underside of the tail (see diagram).
- Aim to leave enough tail so that it covers the vulva in ewes and a similar length in rams. Sheep over six months old can only be tail-docked by a veterinarian using pain relief.



Tips for Agricultural Days

Your child should feed the lamb whenever possible leading up to Agricultural (Ag) Day. Lambs fed by parents usually do not perform well on Ag Day. Build a bond with the lamb by walking it on a lead, playing with it, and practice calling the lamb before each feed so that it learns to come when called. Remember to reward the lamb with a treat such as a few pellets or by giving it a pat, hug, and a few kind words.

The lamb should only wear a collar while supervised. The sizing of the collar needs to be regularly checked as the lamb grows, otherwise it will become too tight.



Your legal obligations

Animal Welfare Act 1999

Your animals are your responsibility, and you need to plan for them accordingly. Under the Animal Welfare Act 1999 (the Act), you must provide your animals with:

- proper and sufficient food and water
- adequate shelter
- the opportunity to display normal patterns of behaviour
- appropriate physical handling.

Your veterinarian or local rural supply store can help you get everything your lambs require and provide advice.

Codes of welfare and regulations

Codes of welfare contain minimum standards and recommendations for best practice for different animals in different situations.

Failure to meet a minimum standard in a code of welfare is not directly enforceable but can be used as evidence to support a prosecution for an offence under the Act.

The recommended best practices shown in the codes set out standards of care and conduct, over and above the minimum required to meet the obligations of the Act.

All codes of welfare are publicly available on the MPI website:

mpi.govt.nz/all-animal-welfare-codes

Regulations set out mandatory and enforceable animal welfare standards on matters such as animal care and procedures performed on animals.

Please see the MPI website for more details: mpi.govt.nz/regulations

For more information

Sheep animal welfare leaflet: mpi.govt.nz/animal-welfare-regulation-resources

AgResearch Lamb Rearing Guide: agresearch.co.nz/our-research/lamb-rearing-guide

Farmlands Lifestyle Guide: farmlands.co.nz/Productsandservices/Lifestylers

Check the codes of welfare and regulations

Codes of welfare: mpi.govt.nz/welfarecodes

Regulations: mpi.govt.nz/animalregs

Contact MPI



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mpi.govt.nz

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