

Successful lamb creep feeding and 'sheep psychology'

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Creep feeding involves the provision of a specially formulated feed to suckling lambs, separate from the ewes' feed. While still suckling and grazing with the ewe, the lamb also receives supplementary feed to eliminate any nutritional deficiencies and stimulate rumen development.

Creep feeding is a straightforward process that any livestock producer can utilise. The advantages of pre-weaning nutrition are well known, and various systems are applied successfully in practice.

The gate system

Most small-stock producers make use of the 'gate system' (Figure 1) where the lambs access the feed through openings in a fence or gate. The openings are big enough for the lambs to fit through, but too small for the ewes. Openings should be approximately 20 to 30cm wide (a) for large-framed breeds and lambs that are weaned heavier. The height of the openings tends to vary between 40 and 50cm (b).

It is preferable to have several openings so that lambs can access the creep area from both sides and, where possible, openings should be adjustable to accommodate growing lambs. The inside area of the pen should be around 0,25 to 0,4m² per lamb, so that several lambs can enter simultaneously. Creep gates must be at least 1m (c) high to prevent ewes from jumping over it.

Figure 1: A creep gate and self-feeder.



Provide the creep feed in a feeding trough or self-feeder that can protect the feed from rain and prevent the lambs from climbing into it. Adequate feeding space is essential to ensure that all lambs have access to the feed. The recommended feeding space is 5cm per lamb, but it can be less (minimum of 3cm per lamb) where self-feeders are being used.

Do not provide creep feed *ad lib* from the outset, as low initial feed intake can lead to wastage. By removing old feed and replacing it with fresh feed daily, lambs will learn to eat faster, with a subsequent increase in intake. Once lambs' intake reaches adequate levels, the creep pens – especially on green cultivated pastures – must be moved regularly to prevent trampling, as well as bacteria and parasite build-up. Feed troughs should preferably not be placed near dams, as this is a place where birds gather and can cause possible feed losses.

The creep feed pipe system

An alternative method is the so-called 'creep feed pipe system' (Figure 2). This system

Figure 2: An example of a creep feed pipe system utilising PVC pipe.



does not require creep gates as the lambs can access the feed in the pipes while the ewes are present. The holes in the pipe are large enough to allow the lambs to access feed at the bottom of the pipe, but small enough to restrict the ewes to the top half. Initially, the pipe can be filled to the top with ewe and lamb lick, allowing the ewes to teach the lambs to eat the feed. Later on, only the bottom half can be filled with creep feed, thus preventing the ewes from reaching the feed.

Any polyvinyl chloride (PVC) or steel pipes 25 to 30cm in diameter can be used for this purpose. The holes should be 14 to 15cm in diameter. The holes can also be designed to accommodate horned lambs. A 3m pipe has enough space for roughly 15 holes spaced approximately 4cm apart, allowing adequate feeding space per lamb.

When using large diameter pipes, holes can be made on either side of the pipe to accommodate more lambs (up to 30 per pipe). It is advisable to secure the pipe on both sides, with a base or pedestals, to prevent the pipe from rolling over and the feed from spilling out. The pipe system is

cheaper than the gate system and is easier to move.

The same principle applies when using drums. One 210ℓ drum, cut in half, provides two feed troughs, each with enough space for eight holes of 15cm each in diameter (*Figure 3*). A lid will protect the feed from rain, and holes can be made in the bottom to promote water drainage.

Applying 'sheep psychology'

To reap the benefits of creep feed, lambs need to be adjusted as soon as possible. By applying so-called 'sheep psychology', the lambs' natural instincts and behaviour can be used to lure them to the creep feed:

The lamb-ewe bond

A lamb will never stray too far from its mother. Therefore, place creep pens in areas frequented by ewes, for example where they eat, drink or sleep. Another useful practice is positioning ewes' feed troughs in such a way, that ewes and lambs have to walk past the creep pens to get to the feed troughs. This keeps the lambs

Figure 3: A PVC drum with feeding holes for lambs.



from stopping at the ewes' feed troughs on their way to the creep pens.

Imitation

Lambs born from ewes that are given supplementary feed tend to adapt sooner as they are accustomed to eating from troughs from an early age. The creep troughs can initially be filled with the ewes' feed or lick and as such, lambs will start mimicking the ewes' eating habits.

Around 14 days after the birth of the first lambs, the ewes' feed or lick can be replaced with creep feed and creep gates put up around the troughs.

Fear of the unknown

For a newborn lamb, everything is new and scary. It is therefore advisable to place gates and troughs to be used for creep feeding in the camp before the first lambs arrive. This way, the lambs will already be accustomed to it by the time they need to start feeding.

Comfort and curiosity

To keep the lambs inside the creep pen for longer, the area inside it should be comfortable and inviting. Place the feed at the front of the creep area for the first few days so that the lambs can access it without having to enter the pen. Move the troughs back over time, until the lambs start entering the pen.

Provide shade over the gates during warmer months to lure the lambs closer. Lucerne hay is also handy – it has an enticing aroma, especially when slightly damp. **SF**



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