Assisting with difficult births

Most ewes will deliver their offspring on their own, without any need for assistance. There's usually a reason (or reasons) if you have to assist with many births. There can be many causes of dystocia (difficult or prolonged births) including fetal oversize, malpresentations, prolapse, ringwomb, health conditions, infections, genetics, and feeding. Some shepherds are too eager to intervene. Some producers will cull ewes that experience dystocia, as it can be reoccurring, and there is a genetic component. Dystocia is a leading cause of death of lambs and ewes.

Most ewes will deliver within an hour of their water bag rupturing. If an hour has passed with no progress, check the ewe to see if she requires assistance. Normal delivery is the "diving position," the head (chin) resting on the two front legs (tips of hooves pointing upward). The only time assistance is usually needed is if the lamb is too big or the ewe has given up pushing (for whatever reason).

While sometimes considered a normal presentation, a backward delivery (tips of hooves pointing downward) can lead to complications and may require assistance to ensure a safe delivery. Do not attempt to turn a backwards lamb around. Deliver it swiftly. Pull it straight, then down. After delivery, clear the lamb's nose and mouth of fluids and swing it to clear fluid from its lungs.

Sometimes the lamb is positioned correctly, but the elbows are locked in the birth canal. This is an easy fix. Push the lamb slightly back into the womb so you can extend the elbow joints before pulling the lamb out.

When one or more front (fore) legs are back, you need to cup the foot with your hand (to avoid damaging the uterus) and extend the leg forward. You may need to push the lamb back in to allow the legs to be drawn forward. A small lamb can usually be delivered with one leg back.

Sometimes you'll find a ewe with just a head sticking out of her vagina. If the head has been out for a long time, it may be swollen, and the tongue may be sticking out. While it may seem cold and dead, it might still be alive, but its life is in danger. Clean the head before pushing it back into the birth canal (the ewe will push back). Locate the legs and bring them forward.. If the lamb is dead, it might be easier to remove the head first.

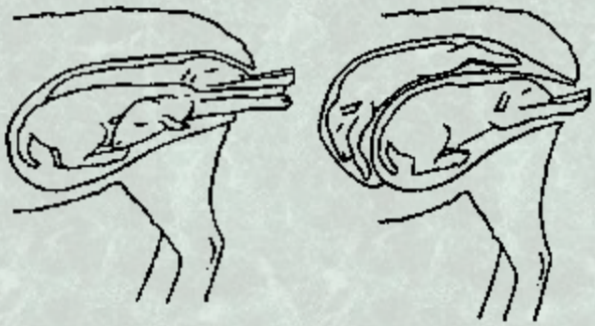
When the front legs are in normal position, but the head is back you'll need to push the lamb far enough back into the birth canal so you can reposition the head. Sometimes this is easier said than done. Use plenty of lubrication and ropes so you don't lose the legs. Don't pull on the jaw, but you can use the eye sockets to pull. The head can be in different places with varying degrees of difficulty to get in the right position for delivery.

This infographic is equally applicable to goats. Sheep terms are used for simplicity.

Many difficult births are due to the lamb being too large to be born on its own, due to size (birth weight) or shape (big head or shoulders) or the ewe having a small pelvic opening (or both). It is common with big singles and certain breeds. Lubrication and gentle traction should eventually allow for delivery of the lamb. In extreme cases, a caesarian section may be necessary to save the ewe and lamb.

A breech birth is when the lamb is positioned backwards, with its legs tucked under its belly, with only the tail visible. It is common with ewes that have been straining for hours without making any progress. A string or small water bag may be all that's visible. The ewe cannot deliver this lamb on her own. To deliver it, you need to bring the rear legs forward and deliver the lamb backwards. Check for other lambs after delivering the breech one.

Limbs can get tangled when two or more lambs are trying to be born at the same time. One of more of the lambs may be malpresented.. You need to figure out how many lambs there are, and which legs belong to which lamb. It may be necessary to push one (or two) lamb(s) back to get another one out. Ropes can help keep the legs straight.



Failure of the cervix to dilate is called ringwomb. It is one of the most difficult birthing situations to deal with. True ringwomb does not usually respond to drugs or manipulation. A caesarian section is usually required to save the ewe and lambs. With a partially dilated cervix you may be able (gently) manually open the cervix to bring the lamb(s) out.

The removal of dead and deformed lambs may require veterinary assistance. Sometimes deformed lambs cannot pass through the birth canal and a caesarian section may be necessary. Dead lambs may need to be removed in pieces if they have been dead for a prolonged period.

Tips for dealing with difficult deliveries

- Know when to intervene, how to intervene, and when to ask for help (after 30 minutes with no progress).
- Wear gloves or OB sleeves when assisting births and/or handling placenta and other birth fluids
- Bunch your fingers into a cone shape when inserting them into the vagina
- .Learn the difference between fore and hind legs.
- Always make sure legs and head are part of the same lamb.
- After delivering lamb(s), always check to make sure there isn't another lamb (or lambs) still in the uterus.
- Be hygienic and use plenty of lubricant when assisting.
- Pull slow and steady, with contractions when possible.
- Reposition the ewe, when necessary, to assist with difficult deliveries.
- Don't cause unnecessary pain to the ewe. Call for help.
- Towel and clean off the head of the lamb, so it can breathe.
- Put lamb(s) by the dam's head to allow them to bond. Then, leave them alone.
- Antibiotics may be given to the ewe to prevent infection after intervention.

By Susan Schoenian, Sheep & Goat Specialist Emeritus, University of Maryland Extension.