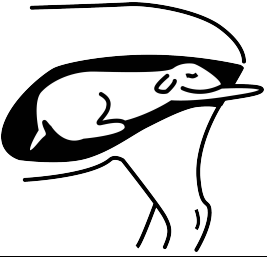
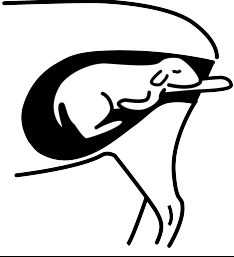
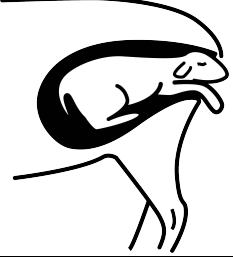


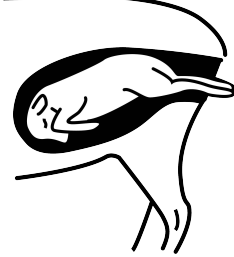
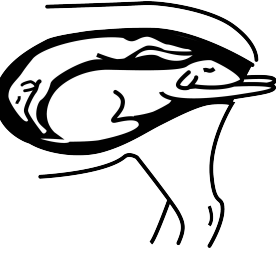



## Assisting Ewes with Difficult Births (Dystocia)

Some possible lambing presentations are shown below. Abnormal positions must be corrected before lamb is pulled. In-depth lambing guides are available.\*

			
<p><b>Normal Presentation:</b> The normal presentation of a lamb is spine upward, forefeet first, with the head (nose first) between them. If assistance is needed, pull front legs by applying a firm steady pull synchronized with the ewe's straining. Lubrication around the lamb is essential. If a lambing rope is needed, ensure it is looped properly over each leg above the fetlock joint.</p>	<p><b>One leg back:</b> Relatively common problem. Ewe may be able to deliver on her own, especially if the lamb is small. If assistance is needed, slide hand along the shoulder to locate the foot of the leg that is turned back. Keep your hand between the hoof and the wall of the uterus/birth canal to prevent damage. Gently move the leg forward to the normal position.</p>	<p><b>Elbow lock:</b> Elbows are pushed downwards at the entrance of the birth canal and held by the pressure of the contractions. Only the tips of the lamb's hooves and the head are visible. Gently push the head back into the birth canal. This will take the pressure off the front legs, so they can be brought forward. Gently pull the legs, one at a time, into the birth canal to a normal position.</p>	<p><b>Both forelegs back:</b> Head is in the pelvis/birth canal and the front legs are not visible. Loop a lambing snare around the head behind the ears. Ensure it is applied correctly and will not tighten directly around the lamb's neck. Push the head back into the birth canal. Gently move the legs into the normal birth position. Take care to protect the ewe from the lamb's hooves.</p>
			
<p><b>Head Back:</b> Position the lambing rope or snare on the legs to keep them from moving back into the birth canal. Lamb may need to be pushed back to be able to gently move the head into the normal position. Pull legs by the rope/snare in time with the ewe's contractions and gently pull the head forward.</p>	<p><b>Backwards:</b> Do not try to turn the lamb around. As the umbilical cord may be broken, intervene quickly, but gently, as the lamb can drown. If the hind legs are present, pull the legs straight back until the lamb's pelvis is out of the vulva, then downward towards the ground. Pulling down before the lamb's pelvis is out can wedge the lamb in the pelvic canal.</p> <p><b>Breech:</b> If only the tail is present (hind legs are forward), gently push the lamb back into the uterus and carefully reposition the hind legs before pulling.</p>	<p><b>Twins - front and back:</b> Multiple births are common and often deliver without problems. If one lamb is reversed it will often be born first. Legs may need to be pulled. The legs of the two lambs may be intertwined. Always ensure that the legs and head are part of the same lamb before attempting to pull.</p>	<p><b>Four legs - one head:</b> Gently push both lambs back into the uterus to allow enough room to deliver one lamb normally. Be sure the legs belong to the head of the same lamb before pulling. The second lamb may have its head back, so gently bring the head into the normal position.</p>

## Assisting Ewes with Difficult Births (Dystocia)

Three distinct stages occur during a normal lambing:

Stage	What's happening	What do you see
<b>Dilation of the cervix:</b> 3 to 4 hours <sup>†</sup>	Uterine contractions start. The normally tightly sealed cervix gradually relaxes, until it is fully dilated and about the same diameter as the neck of the uterus.	How obvious the signs are will vary with individual ewes. Generally, ewe will be uneasy, getting up and down, switching tail and bleating frequently. The ewe will likely show signs of straining.
<b>Expulsion of the lamb:</b> Birth of a single lamb should take <b>an hour or less</b> <sup>†</sup> from the rupture of the first waterbag.	Contractions become stronger and more frequent. The lamb and waterbags (two fluid filled sacs surrounding the fetus) are pushed into the dilated cervix. The first waterbag bursts, releasing a watery fluid through the vulva. As the ewe continues to strain, the second waterbag ruptures, releasing a thicker fluid. The fluids provide lubrication to assist birth.	Discharge from the vulva may be present. The hooves and nose of the lamb can often be seen in the second waterbag before it bursts. The ewe continues to strain, gradually expelling the lamb, forefeet first followed by the head. The ewe may show considerable effort when passing the head and shoulders of the lamb through her pelvis. Once this happens, final delivery is rapid.
<b>Expulsion of placenta:</b> Immediately or by 3 hours <sup>†</sup> after delivery	The placenta (afterbirth), which surrounds and nourishes the lamb through pregnancy, is expelled. In multiple births, there will be a separate placenta for each lamb.	Placental membranes are passed from the vulva. Interaction and nursing by lamb cause oxytocin release in the ewe, which helps loosen the placenta from the uterus.

<sup>†</sup> Times can vary, especially for ewes lambing for the first time. With multiple births, rupture of the waterbag and expulsion of the lamb will be repeated for each lamb.

**Signs of abnormal deliveries:** Most ewes will lamb unaided and the majority of lambs are born in the normal presentation. Assistance may be needed.

- **Stage 1:** Ewe continues to strain, but there is no sign of the waterbags. Problems, such as failure of the cervix to open, can require veterinarian advice.
- **Stage 2:** Ewe is in hard labour for 30-60 minutes after the rupture of the waterbags but there is no sign of a lamb; ewe stops straining, seems excessively distressed or is lethargic; the lamb appears to be wedged in the birth canal or shows an abnormal presentation (e.g. leg back, head back).
- **Stage 3:** Placenta is not expelled by 12-24 hrs after birth. Do not attempt to pull a retained placenta as this may cause uterine hemorrhage or infection.

**Do more good than harm - Points to remember when assisting with a birth:**

- **Make sure help is really needed:** The majority of ewes deliver safely on their own. Intervention may stop the progress of a labour and greatly increases the risk of infection and harm to ewes and lambs. However, if assistance is truly needed, delays could result in the death of the ewe and/or her lambs. Careful, frequent monitoring is key to knowing if the lambing stages are progressing normally and when it is time to help.
- **Cleanliness:** Dilation of the cervix allows pathogens access into the uterus. Cleanliness during interventions is vital in preventing infection. Clip wool from around vulva and anus (if needed) and thoroughly wash the area with soap and a mild disinfectant. Ensure hands, arms, and any equipment used are clean and disinfected. Use **new** plastic sleeves (gloves). Establish an antibiotic treatment plan with your veterinarian before lambing season begins.
- **Lubrication:** Have an ample supply of water-based lubricant on-hand before lambing season begins. In a prolonged delivery, the birth canal will lose natural lubrication. Liberal use of a lubricant is necessary to successfully deliver even the smallest lamb and to prevent serious damage to the ewe's reproductive tract.
- **Take your time and be gentle:** Stay calm when repositioning a lamb. Ensure the lamb is correctly positioned before pulling, and pull in time with the ewe's contractions.
- **Learn how to use lamb snares/ropes properly:** Lamb snares and ropes are valuable (at times essential) tools in assisting with a birth, but can cause injury and even deaths if used incorrectly. Ensure you know exactly how to position and pull with these devices before using.\*
- **Know your limitations:** Some cases (e.g. deformed or dead fetus, very long labour/exhausted ewe) require the help of a veterinarian.

Material for this sheet was largely adapted from 'Assisting the Ewe at Lambing' by Dr. John Martin, as printed in the Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Sheep, 2013. This sheet is not intended to cover every situation or replace the advice of a veterinarian. **Producers are strongly encouraged to review in-depth lambing guides before attempting to assist with a birth, and to consult with a veterinarian as needed.** Contact ALP (403-948-8533, [www.ablamb.ca](http://www.ablamb.ca)) for references to lambing guides.\*