

While you may be able to find a high-quality lamb for your project, your lamb will not succeed without proper nutrition. It is important to be aware of all aspects of a good feeding program for your lamb to deliver a peak performance.

First Steps

Aim for a smooth transition when bringing your project animal home. Try to start your lamb on the same feed it was eating before, slowly making changes in its feed. The five nutrients of primary importance for sheep are water, protein, energy, vitamins, and mineral for reasons outlined below.

Water

As with humans, water is critical for the digestive health of your show lamb. As soon as you get your project home, be sure to provide clean, fresh water and change the water daily. Sheep consume from $\frac{1}{2}$ to 4 gallons of water daily. Decreased water consumption decreases feed intake, limiting the performance and the overall look of the animal.

Protein

Protein is an important component in your lamb's diet as it helps build muscle. Protein requirements vary depending on the stage of the feeding program. Younger sheep are depositing muscle rapidly and benefit from higher protein feeds (from 16%-19% crude protein). As sheep mature along the natural growth curve, muscle deposition declines and fat deposition increases. Feeds lower in protein (11%-15% crude protein) work well when feeding sheep to a finished weight. The figure to the right shows an animal's normal growth curve and why you need to adjust protein/fat throughout your lamb's life.

Energy

Energy intake is critically important for your lamb as it is usually the largest component of the diet and often the most limiting nutrient. Energy requirements

are typically met with carbohydrates and fats found in grains. Most show feeds contain from 2.5%-5.0% crude fat. Energy is important not only for basic biological maintenance, but also for bloom and smoothness, which improve your lamb's appearance on show day. At the same time, excess energy in the diet can result in your lamb depositing too much fat, which is undesirable. Avoid this by adjusting energy levels in the diet throughout the feeding stages of your project. Younger lambs are typically fed rations with lower energy (fat) and the level of fat is increased as the lamb matures.

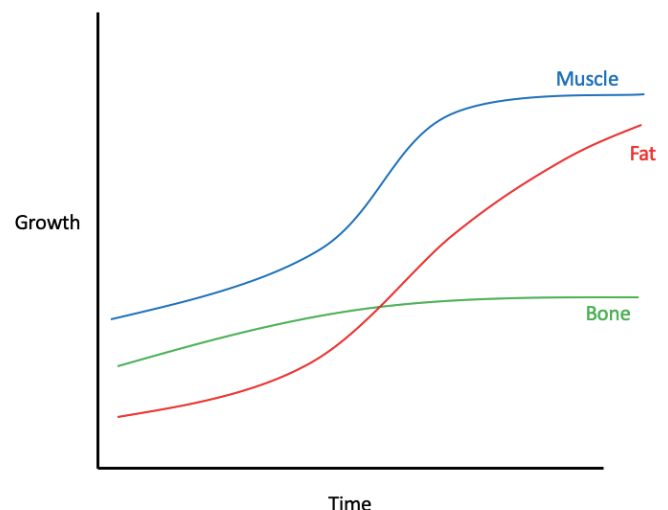
Vitamins

Although essential, vitamins are required in much smaller amounts relative to other nutrients. Selenium and vitamin A are typically added to show feed rations as indicated on the feed tag. To optimize nutrition, supplementation with vitamin B complex is often recommended, especially in diets high in protein and energy.

Minerals

Calcium, phosphorus and salt are the most important minerals in sheep rations. Calcium and phosphorus should be included in diets at a ratio of 2.5 parts calcium to 1 part phosphorus.

Muscle, Bone and Fat Growth in Livestock



Calcium and phosphorus are necessary for proper growth and development, and should be fed in a ratio of approximately 2.5 parts calcium to 1 part phosphorus. Feed rations containing high levels of phosphorus relative to calcium may cause urinary calculi, leading to the formation of stones that block the passage of urine. The addition of ammonium chloride at the rate of 10 pounds per ton of feed helps prevent urinary calculi. Most roughages are higher in calcium and lower in phosphorus, while grains typically have lower calcium levels and average phosphorus content.

Tips for a Successful Feeding Program

Here are some tips to keep in mind when planning a feeding program for your show lamb.

Pay attention to rumen health. Lambs are ruminants, and maintaining the health and function of the rumen is critical. If rumen health is compromised, the subsequent impacts on feed intake, gain, and overall appearance can be detrimental.

Don't forget the roughage. Always supplement a grain-based diet with sufficient roughage. Each lamb should consume approximately two large handfuls (¼ pound) of high-quality hay each day, particularly alfalfa. Lower-quality hay is digested more slowly and can increase the amount of belly (depth and roundness). Thus, it is crucial to feed your lamb a high-quality roughage. Fiber length of your hay is important. A fiber length of 1½ to 2 inches is appropriate as ground or pelleted hay fails to meet your lamb's requirement for neutral detergent fiber, or NDF.

Maintain a feeding schedule. Find a time both in the morning and evening to feed your lamb and keep those times consistent from day to day. Feeding more than one lamb at a time helps, as lambs typically perform better with other lambs around them.

Clean out old feed. Never put new hay or grain on top of uneaten feed. Always clean out the uneaten feed and reduce the amount you feed for the next 1 to 3 feedings until you work your lamb back up to the original amount.

Making changes slowly. Carefully study your lamb throughout the growing and finishing stages of its life making changes to the diet as necessary. Make changes in your lamb's ration slowly. Abrupt changes in your feeding program can negatively affect your lamb's digestive system.

Monitor weight. Know how much time your lamb will have on feed until your target show and carefully monitor weight throughout the feeding period. On average, most lambs will gain about ½ pound per day. Weighing your lamb weekly will help you track its daily gain and determine if you need to push or hold your lamb going into your target show.

What and How Much to Feed

You have many options for feeding your lamb, and the decision can be a bit overwhelming. There are numerous brands of show feeds to fit a wide variety of needs and budgets, or you can mix your own ration. Don't hesitate to ask the breeder who sold you the lamb for advice. No matter which route you choose, remember a few important tips. Start your lamb off with a 16-18% crude protein and 12%-15% crude fiber feed. Feed this ration until the lamb is approximately 100 pounds. Study your lamb's physical appearance to determine if protein and fat content should be kept the same or decreased as your lamb matures.

Follow these guidelines when adjusting feed.

- If your lamb is too fat, reduce the amount of feed and increase crude protein.
- If your lamb is too thin, decrease crude protein and increase fat.

- Never skip a feeding or hold feed to reduce weight or burn fat as this will only work against you.
- On average, you will need to provide 1 to 1 ½ pounds of feed twice a day with about ¼ pound of high-quality hay.

A high-quality ration should

- maintain feed intake
- promote growth and performance
- help maintain a good physical appearance, and
- allow your lamb to reach its genetic potential.

Supplements

Many feed additives are available to complement your base ration. High-protein supplements can help build muscle or burn excess fat. High-energy supplements can help add fat and create a smooth finish. Digestive health supplements such as probiotics can help keep your lamb on feed. Supplements should never be your sole feed source because they have little impact if they are not being fed with a complete feed.

Payton Dahmer
Graduate Teaching Assistant

Alison Crane, Ph.D.
Sheep and Meat Goat Specialist

Department of Animal Sciences and Industry

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MF3527 March 2021