

A Guide to Feeding Lambs
Paul Kuber and Jeanne Osborne
The Ohio State University Department of Animal Sciences

Nutrient Targets by Weight and Age of Lambs

Age	Weight	%CP	%TDN	Targeted Wt Gain	Lb Feed/Day
Young Nursing	20-45 lb	18-24%	72-80%	0.4-0.65 lb/day	Ewe's milk, <i>ad libitum</i> creep feed and high quality forage
Growing	45-80 lb	14-18%	73-78%	0.5-0.8 lb/day	2.5-3.5% body weight
Finishing	>80 lb	12-14%	73-78%	0.6-1.0 lb/day	3-4% body weight

1. Access to clean, fresh water and a proper ratio of Calcium to Phosphorous in the diet (at least 2:1) are necessary to prevent urinary calculi.
2. Sheep are ruminants, so access to forage is necessary for the health of the lamb. Even in the finishing phase, lambs should be given some hay or pelleted forage to maintain the health of their rumen. On high-grain diets, acidosis can be a problem. Including at least 10% roughage in the diet can help prevent this. Commonly referred to as "scratch factor," a few handfuls of hay each day will keep your lamb healthier and are necessary for the welfare of the animal.
3. Do not feed your lambs (or drench them) with products not approved for sheep. Carefully reading feed tags will insure you are feeding the product to your animal in a manner appropriate for that phase of production. Carefully reading your feed tag is also important to find out if there is any active drug ingredient(s) in your feed (i.e., a medicated feed), and if there is a required withdrawal period for the feed.
4. Check your feed tag. Is a mineral supplement required, or does the feed supply all of the minerals that are needed by the lamb? If mineral supplementation is required, make sure you use a mineral supplement approved for sheep. Copper levels are typically too high in mineral supplements not formulated for sheep.
5. Remember to feed your lamb the proper amount so it will grow at the rate needed for the fair. For example, if your target weight is 125 lb (processors prefer lambs in the 110-140 lb range), the starting weight is 65 lb and the fair is in 120 days, you have 60 lb to gain over that time, or 0.5 lb/day. With this gain rate, you would probably feed at the lower levels in the table above. Approximately 2% of the body weight in feed is used for maintenance (depending on the amount of activity your lamb receives). Beyond that amount is used for gain. Remember, although nutrition can be a limiting factor in lamb growth and performance, more feed or higher levels of nutrients will not increase growth performance of lambs past their genetic capabilities!
6. When you purchase lambs, ask the breeder what diet the lamb was being fed (brand, protein level, pounds per day, etc.). Also, ask if the diet included a medicated feed. If possible, you should obtain a feed tag of the breeder's diet for your records. If you are feeding the same diet there should not be a problem. However if you are switching diets, ease the lamb into the new diet to minimize the potential for diarrhea, of having the lamb stop eating, or getting decreased performance. Changing from one grain/concentrate diet to another, or switching from a forage to a grain/concentrate diet can be an art, but here are the basics:

A. Switching from one Grain/Concentrate Diet to another:

Day 1: 2/3 old diet	1/3 new diet	2 feedings
Day 2: 1/2 old diet	1/2 new diet	2 feedings
Day 3: 1/3 old diet	2/3 new diet	2 feedings

By the 4th day, the lamb should be on 100% of the new diet. Remember, the above ratios are based on lamb requirements for weight/consumption percent, and for switching lambs from one grain-based diet to another grain-based diet.

B. Switching a lamb from a Forage to a Grain/Concentrate Diet:

Feeding a lamb a grain/concentrate diet when it has never been fed this type of feed can be tricky. The lambs will most likely be familiar with forage, so put high-quality hay in the bottom of the feed trough. Use this as a bed for the grain or pelleted feed. When the lambs eat the familiar forage, they will inadvertently taste the grain. They eventually will go to the feed trough hoping that grain will be there. Each time you increase the grain, decrease the forage a bit. If they are not consuming all the grain, then do not change your diet until they consume everything. If lambs show signs of diarrhea, then cut back on the grain until they adjust to the level of grain and forage combination.

Example: You have a purchased a 60 lb lamb you are feeding at 3% of body weight (1.8lb/day). The combination of forage and grain should equal 1.8 lb/day. For the first day you should feed 10% grain and 90% forage; each day you will increase the grain by 10%, and decrease the forage by 10%, so that on the 8th day, if all goes as planned, you should be at 80% grain and 20% forage, which is a good level at which to stay. ***(You can get away with 90% grain and 10% forage, but this is the bare minimum, and remember, lambs need forage to keep their rumen active and in good health.)*** While you may be on your planned diet in as early as 8 days, it could take a little longer. Again, if your lamb does not finish the diet for the day then do not alter or increase the amount of grain until it finishes the amount of grain it is being fed. Also if your lamb has diarrhea or loose stool then do not increase the amount of grain, and be sure the lamb has fresh water so it stays hydrated.

Note: Most lambs intended for show will have been on some type of grain/concentrate feed so you will most likely be using protocol A for switching from one grain/concentrate diet to another.

7. Ask the breeder what vaccinations were given to the lamb(s) and what treatments need to be given to the lamb(s) in addition to what they already were given (e.g., Do they need to be wormed? Is a booster of a vaccination required? etc.).

8. Lambs growing (increasing in frame) too fast and not finishing (depositing fat) need a diet adjustment to meet their finishing requirements. To do this, increase the energy component of the diet by decreasing the protein level you are feeding. If the lambs are depositing too much fat and you fear they will be too fat at fair time, an adjustment to their diet will need to be made. Increase the protein in the diet, which will decrease the amount of energy and subsequently the rate at which fat is deposited. Another alternative is to cut back the feed intake to 2-2.5% of body weight. Be sure anytime you change the diet you watch for signs of diarrhea, and that lambs are finishing what you feed. Do not make any fast changes as that will affect gain and the health of the animal.

Works Cited:

Neary, M. (1998). "Feeding the Lamb Crop," Purdue University Extension, <http://ag.ansc.purdue.edu/sheep/articles/feedlamb.html>

"Feeding and Managing Market Lambs and Replacement Ewe Lambs," Bulletin 572: Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service – 4-H Youth Development.