

# Target lamb management for Better Returns



**The information in this booklet was compiled by:  
Chris Lloyd, Better Returns Programme; Lesley Stubbings, LSSC Ltd**

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**Edited: Geoff Dodgson, Chamberlain  
Illustrations: Tebbit Design  
Photography: LSSC, MLC, Moredun Research**

For more information contact:

**Better Returns Programme  
EBLEX Ltd  
Ashton House  
Ambury Road South  
Huntingdon  
Cambridgeshire  
PE29 3EH**

**Tel: 0870 241 8829  
Fax: 0871 433 6205  
Email: [brp@eblex.org.uk](mailto:brp@eblex.org.uk)  
[www.eblex.org.uk](http://www.eblex.org.uk)**

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**Better Returns  
Programme**

Delivered by



Welcome to our third “Target” manual, produced under the Better Returns Programme. Each aims to make you stop and think; to identify where to drive costs down, increase efficiency and generate better returns.

For most of us, producing lambs profitably is at the heart of our business. Easily said, harder to achieve in practice.

Driving costs down and boosting efficiency are critical. In lamb production that means looking carefully at everything we do from early pregnancy onwards. Achieving a large, healthy lamb crop is just a starting point, not an end. Only when lambs have been delivered to our chosen market at optimum prices can we realise better returns.

A lamb crop must be well fed and cared for, making best use of low cost grass, with an effective flock health plan in place. These are the key factors we address in this third manual.

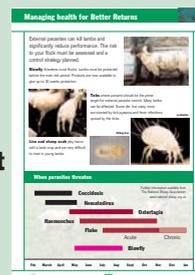
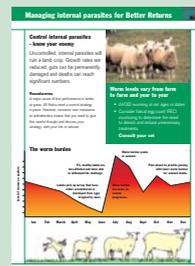
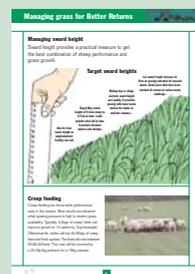


*D Raine*

David Raine  
Chairman  
Better Returns  
Programme Steering  
Group

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**Better lamb management leads to Better Returns**

# The lamb market

Your lambing dates and feeding system must match your target market. Assess how long your lambs will take to reach target weight and what it will cost. Better returns rely on maximising the difference between market price and cost of production.

## Marketing

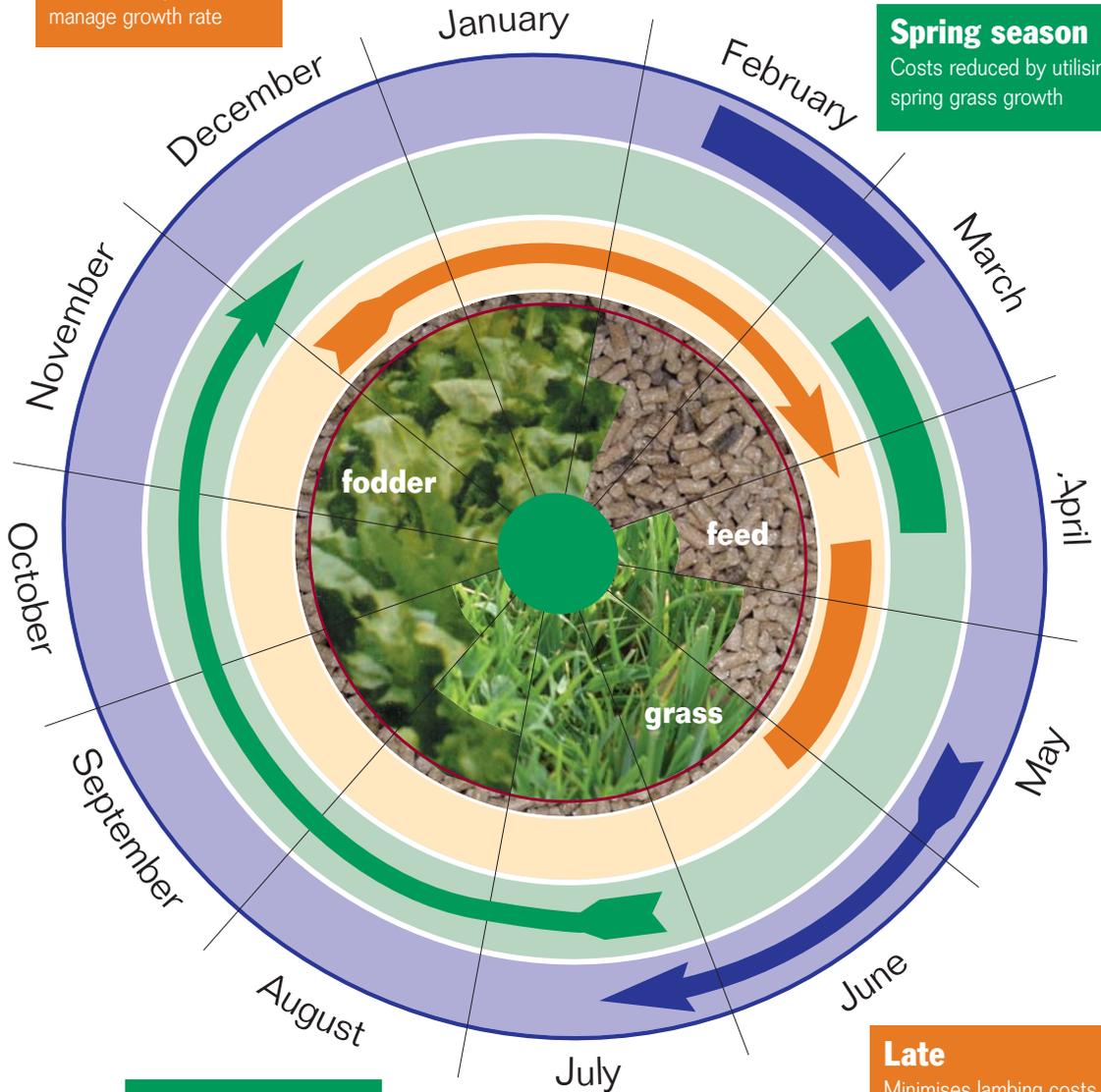
Plan sales objectives and manage growth rate

## Early

Highest risk, high input and high cost system

## Spring season

Costs reduced by utilising spring grass growth



## Marketing

Prices and costs lower in mid-season, but stable

## Marketing

High prices and cost with limited demand

## Late

Minimises lambing costs, but requires good planning for later sales

Whatever your market, best returns depend on starting with strong, healthy lambs that have had good quality colostrum and access to a plentiful supply of milk.



## For pregnant ewes:

- Complement available forage with high energy supplement containing quality protein.
- Avoid sudden changes in management or feeding regime.
- Use scanning, if possible, and match feed for litter size. Otherwise, segregate leaner ewes to feed preferentially.
- Handle ewes regularly to monitor condition and adjust feeding levels accordingly.
- Remember booster vaccination pre-lambing.
- Use a forage analysis to check quality.

## Be prepared for lambing

Good preparation reduces losses.

- Employ one experienced lamber for 250 ewes indoors (350-600 outdoors).
- Allow one individual pen for a maximum of 8-10 ewes indoors.
- Organise lambing equipment, spare colostrum supplies, well in advance.
- Keep pens freshly bedded.
- Spread dry disinfectant or quick lime before re-bedding between ewes.
- Employ high hygiene standards – treat navels, use disposable gloves and wash hands regularly.

## Colostrum

In 24 hours, a newborn lamb needs to receive the equivalent of 10% of its body weight in colostrum



Colostrum has three vital functions:

- Supplies concentrated energy and other nutrients, such as vitamin E, for those first vital hours.
- Acts as a laxative and help the digestive system get started.
- Transfers passive immunity and protects the lamb against diseases (e.g. watery mouth, coccidiosis, clostridial diseases and pastuerellosis) in its first weeks.

## Mothering up and lactation

Mis-mothering threatens better returns.

Allow ewes and lambs time in small groups of 10-15 ewes to establish a strong bond before turning out into larger groups. Feed ewes at grass according to sward height.

**Good preparation delivers the best start for lambs**

During its first weeks of life, a lamb depends on milk. A ewe's milk yield depends on grass quality and availability as well as supplementary feed. Short, leafy swards ensure lambs maintain high growth rates up to weaning.

Good grazing management aims to keep the sward at the optimum height.



## The two basic grazing management systems compared:

### Set versus Rotational Stocking

#### Set or Continuous Stocking

Ewes and lambs graze continually on the whole area

- Cheaper and simpler to operate
- Difficult to match stocking rate with sward height for optimum grazing quality
- Selective grazing reduces efficient utilisation
- No stress from changing grazing area
- Less easy to take out conservation areas
- Worm levels build up as season progresses
- More difficult to maintain clover content

#### Rotational Stocking

The area is split into paddocks. Ewes and lambs rotate around the paddocks

- More complex, needs more management and fencing
- Sward height easier to manage by moving paddocks
- Well managed, it gives best utilisation, otherwise results can be disappointing
- Changes in sward height and surroundings can upset lambs for a few days after each move
- Maintains higher clover content
- Lower worm levels, particularly on aftermaths



### Ryegrass

High quality grazing for ewes and lambs. When reseeding choose the best varieties for your needs.



### Clover

High clover content may not need nitrogen. Lamb performance will increase.



### Poaching

### Weeds

A big threat to productivity. Control weeds and minimise poaching.

## Know your sward

Productivity of any pasture – even old, permanent grass – can be improved by attention to the basics of good management:

## Nutrients

**Phosphorus (P)** and **Potash (K)** should be maintained at Index 2–3 and 2 respectively. Sample every 4–5 years to ensure levels are maintained.

**Magnesium (Mg)** is worth checking where hypomagnesaemia poses a risk.

**Nitrogen (N)** use depends on stocking density, sward type, time of year, residues from previous cropping and restrictions (eg NVZ).

Spring N applications can be guided by the ‘T-Sum 200’ date which occurs from early February to late March, depending on region.

To maintain clover content, limit N to one 50kg/ha application each spring.

## Acidity (pH)

Grass, particularly clover, is sensitive to pH and will not grow well on acidic soil. Check the pH and apply lime to maintain the optimum pH6.3.

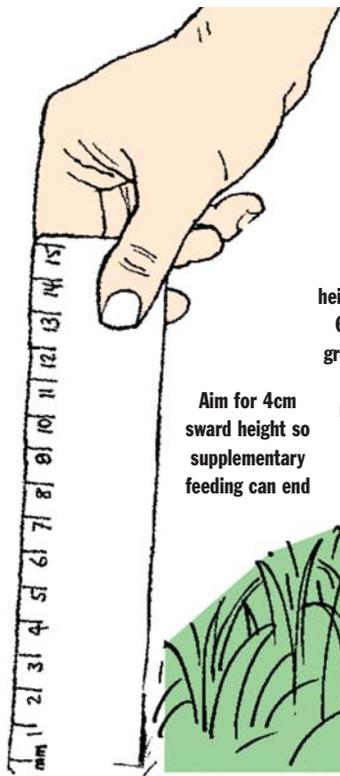
**Consult Defra RB209\***  
Available from 0207 242 6393

**Also see Beef and Sheep BRP Manual 1: Improving pasture for Better Returns available FREE from EBLEX Ltd, call 0870 241 8829 or email [brp@eblex.org.uk](mailto:brp@eblex.org.uk)**

**High growth rates on grass should be the target for all spring lambing flocks**

## Managing sward height

Sward height provides a practical measure to get the best combination of sheep performance and grass growth.



## Target sward heights

Aim for 4cm sward height so supplementary feeding can end

Target May sward height of 5–6cm rising to 6–7cm in June. Lamb growth rates fall in June if pasture becomes mature and stemmy.

Making hay or silage controls sward height and quality. It provides grazing with lower worm burden for lambs in mid/late summer.

Let sward height increase to 8cm on grazing intended for weaned lambs. Avoid areas that have been stocked all season to reduce worm challenge.

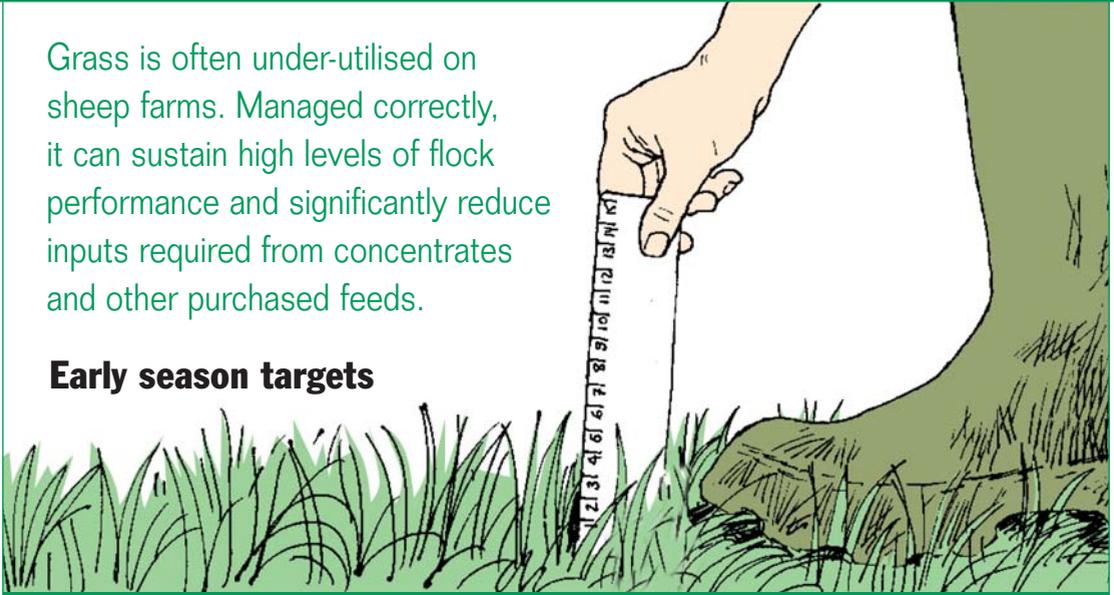
## Creep feeding

Creep feeding can boost lamb performance early in the season. Best results are obtained when grazing pressure is high to restrict grass availability. Typically, 5–6kg of creep/lamb can improve growth to 14 weeks by 1kg liveweight. Offered ad lib, lambs will eat 40–50kg of creep feed and finish quicker. For every 10kg of creep feed it will cost £1.80 per lamb, which will need an extra 10p/kg premium.



Grass is often under-utilised on sheep farms. Managed correctly, it can sustain high levels of flock performance and significantly reduce inputs required from concentrates and other purchased feeds.

### Early season targets



#### Too short

Grazed too tightly. Too little leaf area to capture sunlight and grow fast.



#### Optimum

Sufficient leaf area to capture sunlight and grow quickly while short and leafy.



#### Too long

Grass too long with dead, low value material in the bottom.

**Sward height provides a practical measure to get the best combination of sheep performance and grass growth.**

# Managing internal parasites for Better Returns

## Control internal parasites – know your enemy

Uncontrolled, internal parasites will ruin a lamb crop. Growth rates are reduced, guts can be permanently damaged and deaths can reach significant numbers.

### Roundworms

A major cause of lost performance in lambs at grass. All flocks need a control strategy in place. However, concerns over resistance to anthelmintics means that you need to give this careful thought and discuss your strategy with your Vet or adviser.

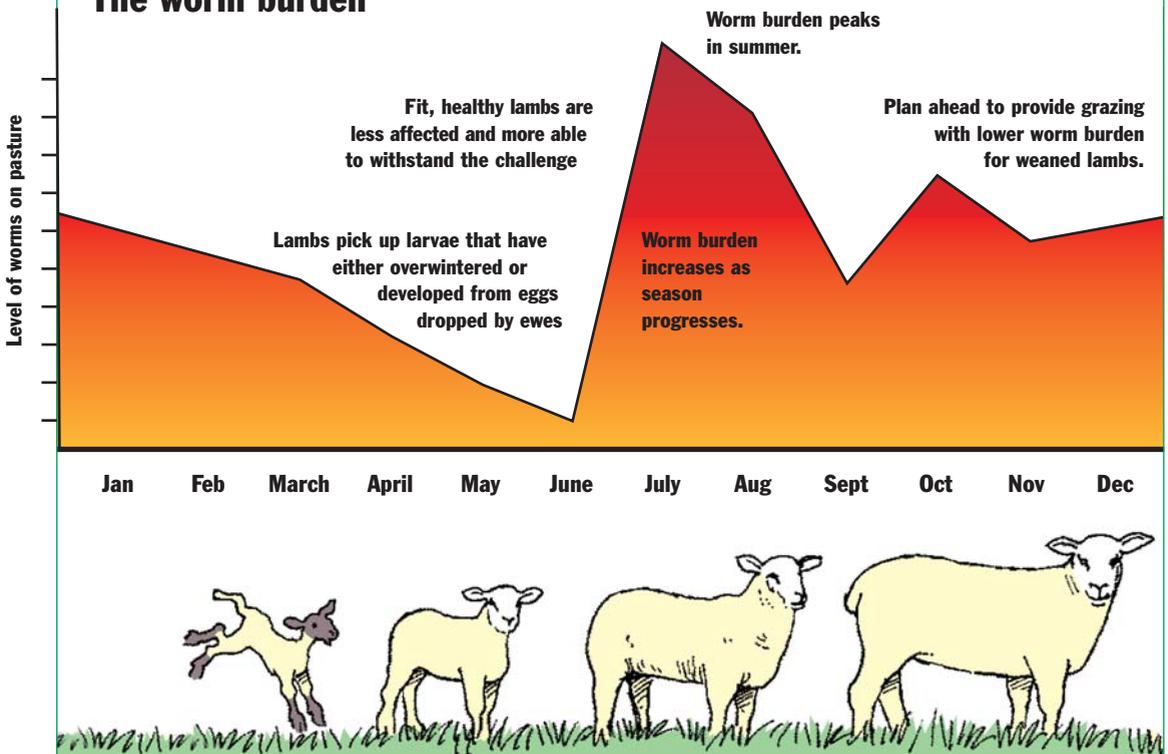


## Worm levels vary from farm to farm and year to year

- AVOID worming at set ages or dates
- Consider faecal egg count (FEC) monitoring to determine the need to drench and reduce unnecessary treatments.

**Consult your vet**

## The worm burden

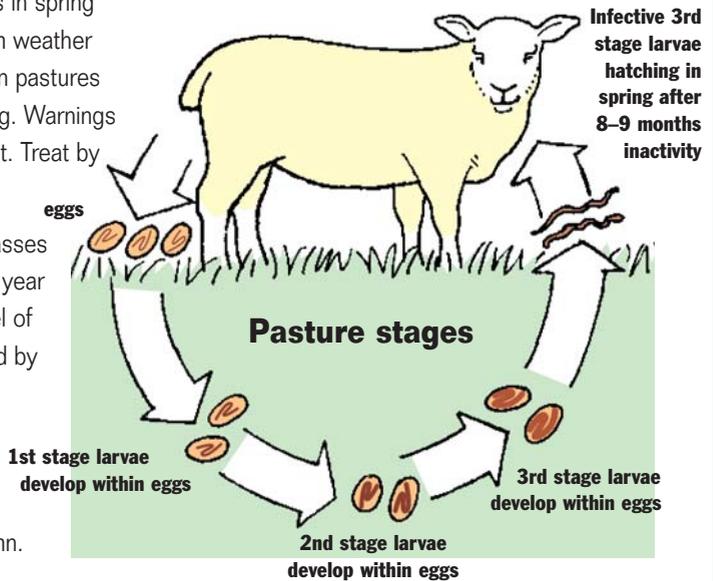


## Nematodirus life cycle

**Nematodirus** usually affects lambs in spring (April/May), and is worst when warm weather follows a cold snap. Risk is highest in pastures that carried lambs the previous spring. Warnings are given – see press or ask your vet. Treat by drenching with a white (BZ) wormer

Unlike other worms, *Nematodirus* passes from lamb to lamb. It usually takes a year to complete its life-cycle, so the level of risk in a pasture is largely determined by the previous year's grazing history.

**Fluke** – lambs can become infested on 'flukey farms' during summer. They need to be treated in the autumn.



## Guidelines to reduce risk of resistance

- ALWAYS use anthelmintics correctly to avoid underdosing.
- Don't assume that scouring lambs have worms – use faecal egg counts to understand if worming is necessary.

Also see **Sheep BRP Manual 8: Target worm control for Better Returns** available FREE from EBLEX Ltd, call 0870 241 8829 or email [brp@eblex.org.uk](mailto:brp@eblex.org.uk)



**Coccidiosis** strikes lambs at 4–6 weeks old. Mortality can be high and those that recover are permanently damaged. Risk can be reduced with a coccidiostat in creep feed. Or discuss drench injection treatments with your vet.

## Risk factors

- Nursery paddocks
- Poor colostrum
- Mixed age groups
- High stocking rates

Develop an effective strategy for YOUR flock

# Managing health for Better Returns

External parasites can kill lambs and significantly reduce performance. The risk to your flock must be assessed and a control strategy planned.

**Blowfly** threatens most flocks. Lambs must be protected before the main risk period. Products are now available to give up to 20 weeks protection.



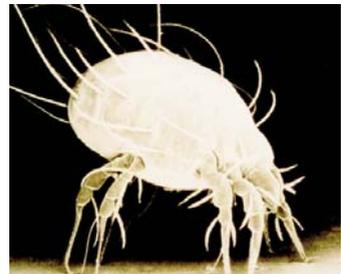
**Ticks** where present should be the prime target for external parasite control. Many lambs can be affected. Some die, but many more are stunted by tick pyemia and fever infections spread by the ticks

For more information see **Sheep BRP Manual 10: Controlling external parasites for Better Returns** available **FREE** from **EBLEX Ltd.**, call **0870 241 8829** or email **brp@eblex.org.uk**

**Lice and sheep scab** play havoc with a lamb crop and are very difficult to treat in young lambs.

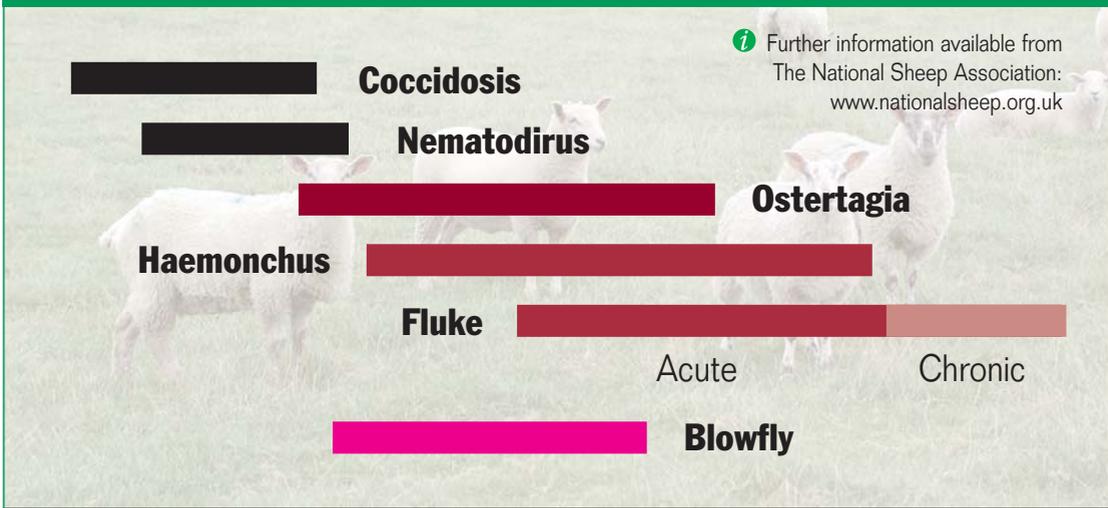


biting louse



scab mite

## When parasites threaten



*i* Further information available from The National Sheep Association: [www.nationalsheep.org.uk](http://www.nationalsheep.org.uk)

Feb    March    April    May    June    July    Aug    Sept    Oct    Nov    Dec    Jan

Each flock needs its own flock health plan. This takes account of known problems on the farm and plans ahead to minimise the risk of other diseases.



**Nutritional deficiencies** including copper, cobalt and selenium can reduce performance of lambs at. If you suspect a problem, discuss with your vet and provide supplements if required.

**Sudden changes of diet** kill many lambs each year. Introduce concentrates carefully over a period of at least two weeks. Change can lead to a pneumonia outbreak. Think ahead and allow time for lambs to adapt.

**Clostridial diseases and pneumonia** strike with little warning. Dead lambs are often the first sign. Colostrum provides protection against clostridial diseases for 12–14 weeks and against pasteurilla pneumonia for 3–4 weeks. Vaccination against clostridia is needed if lambs will be finished later than weaning. Where there is a history of pasteurellosis, consider vaccinating starting at 3 weeks old.

## Lameness

Lameness reduces the performance of lambs. Marketing plans will be upset if finished lambs cannot be transported due to lameness.

- Control footrot in ewes to reduce challenge to lambs, by treating individual sheep.
- Use footbath regularly to keep problems at bay.
- Maintain short sward height. Avoid seed heads and stems.
- Avoid or remove wet, muddy areas around troughs.



For more information see **Sheep BRP Manual 7: Target lameness for Better Returns** available **FREE** from EBLEX Ltd, call **0870 241 8829** or email [brp@eblex.org.uk](mailto:brp@eblex.org.uk)

## Remember

There is a huge variation in the withdrawal periods for different products. Take care to check that you do not disrupt your marketing plan by mistakenly applying a long withdrawal period product to lambs that are nearly finished.

ALWAYS follow the manufacturers instructions

- Treat to the heaviest in the group.
- Check drenching/application equipment before every use.
- Store medicines securely and at the correct temperature.
- Never use out of date medicines.

# Weaning for Better Returns



By the time lambs reach 12–14 weeks old they are no longer dependent on milk and gain nearly all their nutrition from grass.

Used correctly, weaning at this stage is an effective management tool as it allows you to :

- **Move lambs to better grazing**
- **Group lambs by weight and target finish date for planned marketing**
- **Avoid high worm burdens on high risk pastures**
- **Prepare ewes for next season.**

After weaning lambs can gain about 1kg/week on good grazing without any supplementary feed. Often this is not achieved in practice, because the grazing is unsuitable. The key is an average sward height of 8cm. It is important to monitor and control worm burdens.



**Weaning is a pivotal part of the sheep year  
– Better Returns depend on it**

## Weaning – and planning for market

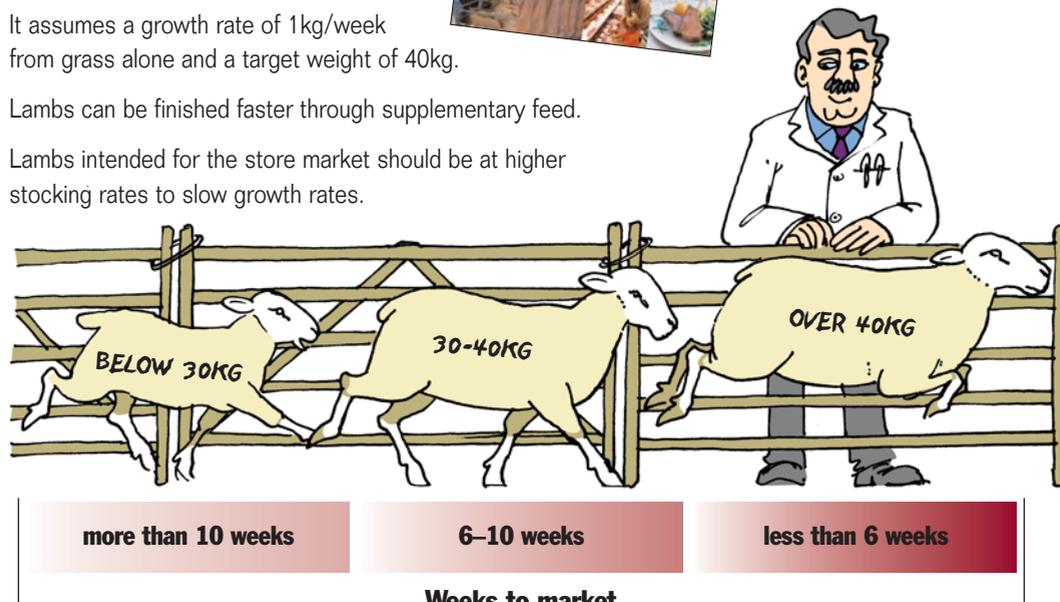
Group lambs by weight to allow marketing to be planned. Each group will take a certain time to reach market weight. The example below is for lambs from a lowland flock of halfbred ewes. It assumes a growth rate of 1kg/week from grass alone and a target weight of 40kg.

Lambs can be finished faster through supplementary feed.

Lambs intended for the store market should be at higher stocking rates to slow growth rates.



Details of selecting lambs for market are in *Target Lamb Selection for Better Returns*



## Weaning marks the start of the next season for ewes

This is the time for culling and replacement planning. Be sure to condition score and group ewes for grazing or for supplementary feeding. Segregate lame ewes for treatment or cull persistently lame sheep.

Grazing management should plan ahead to identify flushing and tugging paddocks. Allow sward height on these areas to increase to 8–10cm.



## Weigh lambs regularly to keep on target and plan ahead to meet market needs



This is one of a number of booklets produced under the Better Returns Programme.  
Other titles in the series include:

1. Target lamb selection for Better Returns
2. Target ram selection for Better Returns
4. Target ewe management for Better Returns
5. Target store lambs for Better Returns
6. Target easier management for Better Returns
7. Target lameness for Better Returns
8. Target worm control for Better Returns
9. Improving ewe breeding for Better Returns
10. Controlling external parasites for Better Returns
11. Target ewe fertility for Better Returns

All contain useful pointers to where you can achieve savings in time and money as well as increase the value achieved from your sheep enterprise.

Copies are available FREE from EBLEX Ltd, call 0870 241 8829 or email [brp@eblex.org.uk](mailto:brp@eblex.org.uk)

For more information contact:  
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**EBLEX Ltd**  
**Ashton House**  
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**Huntingdon**  
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**PE29 3EH**

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**Fax: 0871 433 6205**  
**Email: [brp@eblex.org.uk](mailto:brp@eblex.org.uk)**  
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