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Importance of Colostrum

As kidding season approaches, the first sets of spring lambs and kids will begin arriving. It is important to make sure you have all the supplies you might need to care for the newborns when they arrive. One supply that is very important to have on hand is frozen colostrum or colostrum replacer. If a doe or ewe does not have enough colostrum to feed her kids or lambs, or there is a weak or orphaned kid or lamb that needs to be bottle fed, it is important you have access to this.

Colostrum, also referred to as liquid gold, is thick and yellowish in color and is the first milk produced. Colostrum is nutrient rich and most importantly contains immunoglobulins, or maternal antibodies. The antibodies found in colostrum are large proteins. When born, kids/lambs do not have any antibodies, therefore the antibodies absorbed from colostrum help develop their immune systems and protect them against disease. If the newborns do not get colostrum, their chance of survival is very low. When born, the small intestine has openings to absorb these proteins. It is important to make sure colostrum is consumed right after birth.

These antibodies can only be absorbed within the first 24-36 hours after they are born and they are absorbed best within the first few hours after birth. After 24 hours, the kid's/lamb's ability to absorb the antibodies in colostrum is very minimal. This is why colostrum is one of the most important supplies to have. When bottle-feeding kids/lambs, they should consume at least 10 percent of their body weight in colostrum.

While colostrum from the mother is the most ideal source, frozen or fresh colostrum from another doe/ewe in your herd is the next best option. Colostrum replacer will work as well. If using a colostrum replacer, make sure to follow the mixing and storing instructions on the package. Colostrum should not be warmed up in the microwave, because the high temperature will kill the antibodies in the colostrum. If you are unable to find goat/sheep colostrum replacers, colostrum replacers for cattle will also work.

If you are using colostrum from a doe/ewe that you do not know the history of or a doe/ewe that has tested positive for Caprine Retrovirus (CAE) or Ovine Progressive Pneumonia (OPP), the colostrum should be heat treated to 140°F for an hour before feeding to kids/lambs to prevent diseases being passed through the colostrum.

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