

Lamb Nutrition
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Lamb Milk Replacer: Ask before you buy



Research your lamb milk replacer options to select the one that is right for your flock.

WITH MOST LAMBS THROUGH the weaning transition, it may seem early to begin preparation for next spring's lambing season - but, to assure that you're prepared and your lambs achieve early success, planning is key. One of the biggest decisions a dairy sheep producer can make is selecting which milk replacer will be best for their lambs.

The milk replacer fed to the lamb crop impacts early growth and long-term flock health: a quality milk replacer has the potential to address early health problems and the power to boost flock performance. With so much at stake, Dr. Tom Earleywine, director of nutritional services for Land O'Lakes Animal Milk Products, recommends that producers fully research their options when making purchasing decisions.

"The milk replacer you select greatly influences your flock's performance," he says. "When looking for a milk replacer, be sure to research the product. Look beyond the label: the label doesn't tell you the whole story about the product and buying strictly by the label may present your flock with unexpected challenges."

Dr. Earleywine suggests using the label as a starting point when choosing a milk replacer and offers the following advice to select the best milk replacer for your flock.

More doesn't always mean better

Be aware when comparing products that more of a nutrient does not mean that the product is necessarily better.

For example, if product X has a higher level of vitamin A than product Y, this does not automatically mean that product X is a better product. "It may look better on the label but, if certain nutrients are provided in excess to the lamb, it can be toxic," explains Dr. Earleywine.

Analyze the research

Ask to see the research behind the product. Look for research that has been conducted on lambs. Highly reputable companies will invest in lamb-specific research, giving you confidence that the positive results are repeatable in your flock.

Identify the supplier

Find out who the milk replacer supplier is. Are technical staff members available locally to assist if challenges occur? Milk replacer purchases should be made from reputable suppliers because they have the research and the resources to back up their product through your production cycle.

Is the milk replacer made for lambs?

Make sure that the milk replacer purchased has been specifically formulated for lambs. Milk replacer formulated for lambs will mimic the composition of ewe's milk and is better for the lamb. At a minimum, lamb milk replacer should have 24 percent protein and 30 percent fat.

The packaging can provide some insight in this area. If the packaging has a photo of an animal species aside from lambs, it's likely not made specifically for lambs.

Are the ingredients human edible grade?

Ingredients used in milk replacer come in two types: human edible grade and milk replacer grade.

Human edible grade means that the quality of ingredients is the same as those used in the manufacturing of products for human use. Human edible grade ingredients have very strict quality standards of less than 20,000 colony forming units (cfu) for bacteria counts.

Milk replacer grade ingredients are a lower quality product and have bacteria counts that start at 20,000 cfu's and go up from there. Milk replacer grade ingredients can also have a higher degree of nutrient variability.

Higher bacteria counts in the milk replacer ingredients could put lambs at risk by compromising the immune system. Dr. Earleywine notes, "You may have no problems feeding a milk replacer with lower quality ingredients, but at some point in the future you could have a problem. The possibility of a problem puts your lambs at risk."

Land O'Lakes Animal Milk Products' milk replacer products contain human edible grade ingredients and have quality standards in place to maintain bacteria counts well below 20,000 cfu's.

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Optimized performance measures

Ask if there are technologies included in the milk replacer that support immunity and optimize performance. Newer milk replacers may also have unique fatty acid profiles that make the milk replacer more like the ewe's milk. This information is not necessarily present on the label.

How does the milk replacer mix?

Examine how the milk replacer mixes in warm water to shed additional light on the quality of product.

If the product disappears right away in the water, there is the possibility that the product will separate, that is fat molecules will float to the top and protein will settle to the bottom. The separation of the fat and protein molecules is problematic because it prevents lambs from receiving consistent nutrition at each feeding.

Minimal powder separation is a good indicator of a quality product.

Does the company conduct quartile sampling?

Ask to see the milk replacer company's quartile testing. Reputable companies will conduct tests after the milk replacer is mixed to see if the nutrition is consistent throughout the mix. This process is called "quartile testing." A beaker of liquid milk replacer is allowed to sit for 30 minutes and then each of the four quarters are sampled – the top, the two middle and the bottom quarter or quartile – and tested for protein and fat to ensure that it has equal nutrition in each section.

"This type of sampling is important because it gives you the confidence that, drop for drop, the milk replacer is the same," says Dr. Earleywine. This is also an important piece of information for those farms that feed milk replacer free-choice. If the milk replacer does separate, the lambs that drink milk first will consume a different nutrient set than those that drink later on in the day.

Does the milk replacer have a preservative system?

Inquire if the milk replacer has a preservative system. This is especially important if you feed free-choice to assure the milk replacer stays fresh throughout the day.

What is the copper count?

Examine the copper level in the milk replacer. The copper level is important, but not just because of toxicity; the lamb actually needs 8 to 11 parts per million of copper for normal growth. Milk ingredients often are deficient in copper for lambs so milk replacer actually often needs a small amount added to provide for proper growth. "If the milk replacer has added copper (usually copper sulfate) it is not necessarily bad and in fact may be better than one that doesn't, if it has the proper level," explains Dr. Earleywine.

Answers to these questions provide additional insight that will ensure that you are selecting a lamb milk replacer that is right for your flock. Look for these quality attributes; they often are not in the "lowest priced" milk replacer. To promote a positive lambing season next spring, begin researching your best return on investment options for milk replacer today.

For more information on Ultra Fresh® Lamb Milk Replacer, visit www.lolmilkreplacer.com or call 1-800-618-6455. To order Ultra Fresh® Lamb Milk Replacer, lamb producers are encouraged to contact their local feed retailer. ■

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