

SHEEP

Guide for Hobby Farmers and Smallholders

Some basic health and welfare tips from DPIPWE

About sheep

Sheep were first domesticated in central Asia around 10,000 years ago, but it was only 3,500 years ago that humans first learnt how to spin wool.

While sheep dairying is a small industry in Australia, worldwide there are more sheep milked every day than cattle.

There are hundreds of different breeds of sheep, with around twenty breeds in significant numbers in Tasmania.

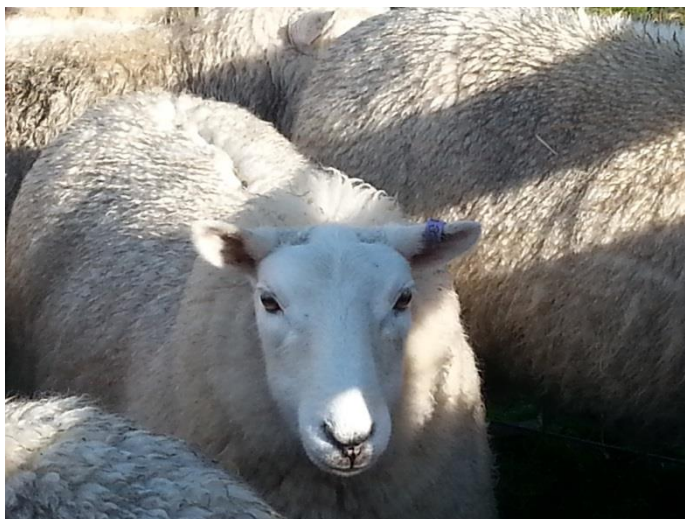
You can tell a sheep's age by looking at its teeth.

In most smallholding situations, a sheep will live naturally to around 9 to 12 years, but some live longer. The condition of a sheep's teeth is a major determinant of its longevity if it is otherwise healthy.

Sheep recognise each other more by sight than by smell. That's why there's often temporary confusion amongst a flock after shearing.

Research in the UK and elsewhere has busted the myth that sheep are stupid. It was found they have remarkable memories and possess some basic problem-solving skills. They have even been known to outwit some humans, especially at mustering time!

Sheep have a very strong flocking instinct, and it is this that is sometimes mistaken for stupidity. This flocking instinct isn't just socialising, it is much more than that – and anyone running sheep on their property needs to allow for the flocking instinct in their management practices.



Introducing sheep onto your property

Even if you are buying only a few sheep, you should always insist on the vendor providing a Sheep Health Statement. This is your best defence against introducing major diseases such as Ovine Johne's disease, footrot and lice onto your property. If the vendor won't supply a Sheep Health Statement, you should instead buy from someone who will.

When buying sheep, make sure you select a breed or cross that suits your property. For example, some breeds that are suited to dry conditions will struggle in higher rainfall areas. Conversely, some breeds that do well on improved pastures that provide good feed all year round will struggle on properties with lesser quality pasture. It's often useful to talk to an experienced sheep farmer in your district about the breeds best suited.

If you want to go for a breed that is unusual in your district, bear in mind there is usually a very good reason they are that rare. Over the years, a number of breeds have been introduced by people that simply want something different from the local norm. In many such cases, the sheep have suffered because they are not “fit for purpose” given the local conditions. It is recommended you go with a breed that is known to do well in your local area, unless you are a highly experienced sheep person.

Before the sheep arrive, check that your boundary fence, at least, is sheep proof. Plain wire fencing that may be sufficient for cattle will not be adequate for sheep. You really need hinge lock or a similar type of pre-fabricated fence. Sheep generally push through or under a fence rather than jump over, so check for any gaps or low spots under the bottom wire – sheep can push their way under a fairly small gap under the fence. If you have just a small gap under the fence, you can usually fix that easily by attaching an offcut of the hinge lock to the bottom of the fence as a “skirt”, laying a few inches of the hinge lock along the ground, and then hold that down with rocks until the grass grows through the skirt and secures it.



When the sheep first arrive on your property, give them a “quarantine drench” to minimise the risk of bringing a worm problem onto the place.

Unless you know the vaccination history of the sheep, assume they have had no vaccination at all. This means a “5 in 1” or “6 in 1” vaccination upon arrival and a follow up four to six weeks later.

Check them for lameness, lice and any weed seeds in their wool.

After the above, keep all new arrivals isolated from your other sheep, for two weeks if possible, and monitor them closely for disease.

All of the above still apply if you agist sheep onto your property (or if you borrow a ram).

Sheep health

The three major health problems that our animal welfare officers see in sheep on hobby farms are malnutrition, worms and lameness. Lice and flystrike can also be problems on hobby farms.

Sheep nutrition

Because sheep grow a thick fleece, you will not be able to keep a close eye on their body condition from a distance. The ability to assess your animal’s body condition is an essential skill for anyone with livestock. The basics are easy. You’ll find our hobby farmer guide to body condition scoring for sheep on the DPIPWVE website.

Once you have learned how to score the body condition, you will be able to check that your sheep are getting adequate nutrition.

You should ensure you understand the nutrition needs of sheep and we have produced a beginner’s guide to sheep nutrition to help you do that. It is available on the hobby farmer’s page of the DPIPWVE website.

Good pasture is the best feed for sheep. There may be times during the year when they may need some supplementary feed. Good hay is best.

Unlike cattle, sheep generally do not eat a lot of hay in one session – they tend to eat a bit of hay, graze a bit, eat a bit more hay and so on. So don't rush into assuming that the sheep aren't interested in the hay you have given them. But if they show no signs of eating the hay at all, that would suggest the hay is of poor quality and you may need to get better hay for them.

Sheep that are maintained in good condition when feed is short actually use the feed much more efficiently. That's why the bulking nature of hay is useful when the pasture is short. If you can keep the rumen bulked up, the sheep will extract the maximum nutrition from its feed. But if the rumen is not bulked up for long periods, the sheep will only extract part of the available nutrition from the feed. And that means you need more feed to achieve the same result – and that means either the sheep will continue to lose condition or you will be up for buying a lot more feed.

Sheep pellets are also a good form of supplementary feed. But you must introduce pellets into the sheep's diet gradually so its digestive system can adapt.

Never feed cattle pellets to sheep, as they invariably contain copper at a rate that can kill sheep. And never feed pig or poultry pellets to sheep as they may contain animal proteins that it is illegal to feed to ruminants.

Feeding grain to sheep is not recommended for hobby farmers because it takes some experience to feed grain without causing acidosis (grain poisoning) that can make sheep very sick or even kill them. Pellets are generally no dearer than grains, when bought by the bag through your local rural retailer, and pellets are much safer.

A stock lick block can be a handy way of providing the micronutrients (trace elements) to sheep when the pasture is in short supply. But, providing the hay you are using as supplementary feed is of good quality, the lick blocks may be unnecessary. Also lick blocks are hard on sheep's teeth, especially older sheep, so if you need to provide micronutrients, you may be able to provide the key ones by a simple home-made loose lick fed via a container that the sheep can't tip over. Note that a small proportion of your flock will not eat a sufficient quantity of lick so individual supplementation for some trace elements is often the most efficient method to make sure every sheep is getting enough.

If you are considering providing micronutrients by way of vaccination, drench, or homemade loose-licks, please note that selenium and copper can be deadly poisonous to sheep even in small doses. So, never treat for a selenium or copper deficiency unless your vet has diagnosed such a deficiency in your sheep.

Worms in sheep

This can be a huge problem in sheep if not managed correctly. A proper worm control program will save you and your sheep a lot of stress.

Please ensure you have a basic knowledge of worm control before getting livestock. To help you do that, we have published a beginner's guide to worms in sheep on our website. If you understand the worm cycle, you will be well-placed to beat it and keep your sheep free of worm disease.

Frequent drenching of sheep is likely to make a worm problem worse in the long run. If you have to drench frequently to treat worms, you are fighting a battle you will inevitably lose, so speak to your vet about the best worm control options for your situation – and drenching is likely to be only a small part of that.

If your property is split up into several paddocks, rotating your sheep (known as “cell grazing” or “block grazing”) will be a major component in your management of the worm risk.

As outlined above, any sheep (or goat or alpaca) arriving on your property should be given a quarantine drench on arrival, to treat any worms they have before they go out onto your paddocks.

If your sheep are losing condition while good feed is available, you should check whether they have a worm problem. Scouring (or diarrhoea) is a sign of a worm problem but please note that not all wormy sheep have the scours. If you suspect worms as the cause, you should drench the sheep and put them onto clean pasture. If they stop losing condition (and stop scouring if they were scouring), that strongly suggests that it was, indeed, a worm problem. This means your worm management plan isn't working, so you should work out why.

If your sheep show signs of worms, it is always useful to do a worm test. You can arrange this through your vet or by using one of the worm test kits available from your rural supplier or DPIPW. A worm test is not expensive.

Lameness in sheep

Footrot is relatively easy to prevent but can be very difficult to manage if you get it on your property. That is one of the reasons you shouldn't even consider bringing sheep onto your property unless the vendor supplies a sheep health statement, which includes information about footrot on his/her property.

You need to check the sheep's feet regularly for signs of footrot or overgrown hoof. Pare the feet as often as necessary to keep them in good shape; how often will depend on your particular situation. Some breeds of sheep will require their feet to be checked and trimmed more often than others. Sheep in higher rainfall areas or who spend a lot of time on damper paddocks will require more regular feet inspections than the same breed of sheep on drier properties.



By no means all lameness in sheep is due to footrot. Often it is due to overgrown hooves, foot abscesses or even a condition known as “scald” between the claws. We have information on our website about [how to identify the cause of lameness](#) and [how to pare \(trim\) sheep's feet](#).

Lice

By far the most likely way you would get lice onto your property is if a lousy sheep is allowed onto the place. That's why you should always check any new arrivals for any signs of lice before you mix them with your other sheep. And why you need to have sheep-proof boundary fencing (it's not just to keep your sheep in, but also to keep other people's lousy sheep out).

People sometimes blame the sheep next door for the lice on their property. But lice don't live long off the sheep. So the chances of lice entering your property by a lousy neighbouring sheep leaving infested wool on the boundary fence, and then your sheep rubbing against that lousy wool, are actually quite small. If you think your neighbour's sheep are a lice risk for your sheep, your best defence is a good boundary fence.

Flystrike

By far the most common site for flystrike is the backend of the sheep. If your sheep scours (i.e. has diarrhoea), the faeces can stick to the wool and that creates an ideal bait for the blowfly.

If you have sheep that are scouring, your first step must be to prevent the diarrhoea. In many cases, it is worms causing the diarrhoea, so a drench, accompanied by a move onto clean pasture, should stop that. It helps if you can also feed the sheep some hay as that will help dry out the diarrhoea as well.

Unless the weather is particularly blowfly-friendly (warm and very humid), it is usually best not to crutch the sheep (shear the dags off) for at least a week after you have stopped the diarrhoea. If you try and crutch straightaway, the dags are likely to be stuck to the skin and you are likely to inflict cuts and pain on the sheep. And you'll probably have another lot of dags to remove anyway because the sheep will continue to scour for a while after the drench treatment. But if you leave the crutching for a week or so, you will be better able to shear under the dags without cutting the sheep. And you'll only need to dag the sheep once!

However, if the sheep is flyblown, you must treat it straightaway. That means shearing the wool away from the struck area, including a good margin around it, and treating with a registered flystrike treatment that you can get over the counter from your local rural supplier (household fly spray, kerosene and other "bush treatments" are unacceptable).

Sheep welfare

The most common welfare problems in sheep on hobby farms are malnutrition, worms and lameness. So, good welfare depends on sheep owners managing their livestock, as outlined above, to avoid these problems.

Healthy sheep are generally "low maintenance" when compared with other livestock species. But this does not mean they are "no maintenance"!

You should routinely check your sheep daily – twice a day during lambing. Any disease or injury problems must be treated promptly.

Unless they are one of the self-shedding breeds, sheep need to be shorn at least once a year.

Dog attacks can be fatal for sheep and distressful for owners. Always report any dog straying onto your property to the local council ranger.

It is very stressful for a sheep to be separated from the flock. That's why, if you have sheep, you should have more than one. If you need to keep a sheep in the shed – for example, if you are nursing it through illness or injury – you should have another sheep with it. The only exception is where you suspect the sheep may have a contagious disease, in which case it should be isolated but, ideally, still able to see other sheep.

There are, unfortunately, some people whose temperament is not suited to working with livestock. If a shearer, agent, carrier or anybody else that handles your sheep shows any signs of losing their temper with the sheep, you should intervene straightaway. You can well do without such people handling your sheep.

Don't hesitate to report any case of cruelty to sheep (including neglect) to the RSPCA on 1300 139 947.

Other biosecurity practices

You will need a basic set of yards to look after the sheep properly.

You must have a Property Identification Code (PIC) for your property. You can get a PIC by registering online via the [DPIPWE website](#) or by contacting the Registrar of Animal Brands at DPIPWE on 6165 3240.

Make sure all your sheep are properly tagged. The tag must include your PIC number. This is to enable rapid tracing in the event of an emergency animal disease and to help reduce the chances of stock theft.

Whenever you use drench, lice treatments, vaccines or other chemicals, always read the label and, in particular, follow the instructions about dosage rates and withholding periods. Don't assume that they are the same for all types of drench, vaccine etc.

If you use herbicide or insecticide in your paddock, check the label for information about how long the paddock must be destocked.

When you fertilise a paddock, you should keep sheep off it for a few days if you've used superphosphate, or three weeks if you've used a nitrogenous fertiliser or poultry manure.

If you transport your sheep (to another property, sale etc), you can do so yourself but you must comply with the livestock transport regulations. In short, that means using a stock crate that fits your trailer or ute tray properly – no gaps for sheep to get their legs through, a sufficient height to hood the sheep in and actually secured so it can't move on the ute or trailer. And the sheep must be "fit to load" – that means you must not transport sheep that are unable to stand or walk normally, are in late pregnancy or have young lambs, or are severely injured or distressed (flystrike, cancer, exhaustion, emaciation etc). Meat and Livestock Australia has a "Fit to Load" guide on its website. Please note that saleyards and abattoirs will not accept sheep that are not "fit to load".

Sheep husbandry – the tasks for a hobby farmer

Check your sheep daily for any signs of lameness or other problems. During lambing, you should check the ewes twice daily for any signs of a stuck lamb, prolapse etc.

Shearing should be done once a year. Any time except winter, but spring is usually the best time.

Vaccination. You should maintain a current vaccination program for the clostridial diseases (pulpy kidney, tetanus etc). This is done by giving your sheep a "5-in-1" or "6-in-1" vaccination – two shots 4 to 6 weeks apart to start with and then a booster shot each year. The vaccine is available over the counter from your rural supplier and is not expensive. Check the dosage on the pack, as some are 1ml and other brands of vaccine are 2ml per sheep.



If you are breeding, you should give the annual vaccine about four to six weeks before lambing as that will give the lamb some much-needed protection from, in particular, tetanus when it is first born. You will need to vaccinate the lambs at marking (i.e. tailing and castration), as that is a tetanus risk, and again four to six weeks later.

Drenching. You should drench your adult sheep at least once a year and move them onto clean pasture straight after the drench. It is usually convenient to do this at the same time as shearing. You may need a second drench each year, ideally six months or so from the first. If your adult sheep are getting worm problems despite being drenched twice, then your worm management program isn't working. So, don't just drench more often, instead talk to your vet about why your worm management program isn't working and what you need to do differently.

If you are breeding, your ewes should get a pre-lambing drench – four to six weeks before lambing. So, the same time as their annual clostridial vaccination.

Lambs and weaner sheep are more susceptible to worms than adult sheep. They may need an additional drench if they show the signs of worms. Ideally, young sheep should have the cleanest and best pastures on your property and this will help reduce the risk of worms.

Checking the feet and teeth. You should check, and if necessary trim, the feet of all your sheep before winter, while the ground is still reasonably hard. And then check the feet again in spring – at shearing time if you shear in the spring. Some breeds may need their feet checking more often than that, especially if your property has a lot of ground that stays wet for long periods.

You should check the teeth at the same time as checking the feet. You are checking for any tooth problems that will affect the sheep's ability to eat properly. If you keep sheep into their old age, they will lose their front teeth. This will make it more difficult for them to get a decent bite of pasture if it is short, so these older sheep are likely to need extra hay during periods when feed is too short for them to get a good bite.

Marking (i.e. tailing and castrating). If you are going to do this, you should do so in the first six weeks of a lamb's life. Tailing or castrating sheep over six months of age is cruel unless done under anaesthetic by a vet. Some hobby farmers choose not to tail dock their lambs. This is perfectly acceptable providing you are prepared to do the small amount of extra work needed to minimise the risk of flystrike of the sheep's back end. This normally means crutching the sheep some six to eight months after shearing.

The failure to castrate male lambs can lead to major problems later on. We see too many instances of rams running with their mothers and sisters, and all the associated welfare problems. Unless you intend to send the lamb to slaughter before it is nine months old or you are intentionally keeping it as a ram for breeding purposes, you should castrate all male lambs. Using an elastrator (i.e. a rubber ring) is usually the best way for the hobby farmer. But, please note that this method creates good conditions for tetanus, so vaccinating with a "5-in-1" or "6-in-1" clostridial vaccine at marking is essential.

Organic methods. Some hobby farmers want to use organic principles and therefore not use drench or vaccine. This is fine if, and only if, you have an effective alternative way of managing the risks of worm disease and the clostridial diseases (pulpy kidney and tetanus in particular). Your vet will be able to advise you on alternative options.

Our animal welfare officers have had to intervene in cases where people who claim to be using organic principles have sheep that are suffering greatly because of worm disease. In such cases, the use of drench may be the only option left for salvaging the health and welfare of those sheep. It is possible to manage worms organically, but serious problems can occur if the person has not fully understood how to do that.

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