

Sheep Factsheet

Social Structures:

Sheep have a very gregarious and social nature which allows them to form close bonds with other individuals within their flock. Flocks typically include multiple females (ewes), offspring (lambs) and one or more males (rams or tups). Ewes tend to stay in their maternal groups for life, whereas rams will form bachelor groups and move into new flocks. Sheep will graze together with casual affiliations (friends) rather than following a strict hierarchy, as seen in cattle herds.

Natural Behaviours:

Sheep are a prey species that rely solely on their ability to flee from predation in order to survive. Flocking behaviour is seen in groups as small as four individuals, and if an individual becomes isolated from their flock they will become stressed quite quickly. When escape from a threat is not possible, sheep may stamp their hooves or even charge to intimidate their opponent. Rams enter a state of rut (usually in the winter months) when they are ready to copulate with ewes. Males will physically challenge other males for breeding rights and dominance within a flock as typically only the top-ranking male will breed with the ewes. When a male approaches a female, he will nudge her, lick her and paw the ground to let her know that he is interested. Sheep hit puberty between 7 and 12 months and gestation typically lasts 152 days. Sheep are more intelligent than you might think. They are capable of problem-solving, can recognise their own name, and can even be clicker-trained. There is some evidence that sheep can recognise individual human faces for up to 2 years. A sheep's average lifespan is 12-15 years, yet they can be sent to slaughter from as young as five months old.

Goodhearted Sheep Care:

We make sure that our sheep remain in familiar flocks where they can continue to build strong relationships over time. We give all of our sheep a visual health check twice a day, with a through health check every 6 weeks. This includes body scoring our individuals to monitor their weight, checking their tail and skin to make sure there are no infections, and trimming their feet to make sure they have a clean, flat surface to walk on. We give our sheep activity balls to play with and scratching posts to rub against. Another important part of caring for sheep is shearing: removing their heavy woolly fleece at the end of Spring in readiness for the warmer Summer months. At our sanctuary, we take particular care when shearing our sheep to ensure that no sheep is rushed and they are all handled with respect during the quick and painless process. Without shearing, modern domestic sheep may eventually die from overheating or becoming trapped on their back by the weight of their heavy wool during the Winter months.



One of our founders, Dwynwen Jones, helping to feed our rescued cull ewes.

Did you know that although sheep graze on grass in summer, it's important to supplement their feed through the winter months with hay and sheep nuts?



Sheep in UK Agriculture:

Sheep were one of the first animals to be domesticated and are farmed in the UK for their meat, wool and milk. They may be housed in indoor or outdoor systems.

Intense breeding pressure is placed on ewes to produce at least one or two offspring every year, with some breeds being selectively bred to produce three lambs per year. This is particularly exhausting for the mother and may cause still birth or even death in the ewe. Moreover, milk supplies are limited which may cause the second and thirds lambs to be rejected or starve to death without human intervention.

Reports suggest that thousands of sheep may suffer disease and infection as a result of neglect by the farmer. Common illnesses include foot rot/scold, fly strike, lameness and parasites. Fly strike is a particularly serious illness which occurs as a result of faecal build up around the tail and anus of the sheep which attracts flies, which in turn lay their eggs, resulting in maggots, which slowly eat the flesh of the infected sheep. Farmers try to prevent fly strike by docking the tails of young lambs - attaching a rubber band to the naturally long tail to cut off the blood supply, turning the tip of the tail necrotic so that it eventually drops off. This is undoubtedly painful for the young lamb as it is carried out without any form of anesthetic or pain relief.

The lifespan of a sheep in UK agriculture is dictated by the purpose that it serves humans: lambs reared for meat may be sent to slaughter from the age of just ten weeks old up to around four months old. Ewes used for breeding will be sent to slaughter when she is no longer deemed productive'. This could be due to a variety of reasons, all of which are detrimental to the farmer's economic yield. For example, the ewe may have a genetic disorder, she may be elderly, or simply deemed 'problematic' due to previous difficulty during birth and lamb rearing. As ewes age, their fertility and colostrum production decreases as well as their 'cull' market value; this incentivizes

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'Sheep in UK Agriculture continued:

farmers to cull their ewes when they are still reasonably young (anywhere between 4 and 10 years old). Surplus tup lambs may be deemed worthless if they are not intended for mating, and thus may be culled just a few days after birth.



Approximately 540 million sheep are slaughtered each year worldwide. Farming practices and welfare concerns vary around the globe. In 2013 the number of sheep reared for meat and wool were distributed as follows: 44% in Asia, 28.2% in Africa; 11.2% in Europe, 9.1% in Oceania, 7.4% in the Americas.

Welfare Concerns:

Animal welfare is based on three main components (below) and when these become compromised, that can have a direct impact on the quality of that animal's life.

- Physical wellbeing
- Mental wellbeing
- Natural living

The main welfare concerns for sheep in agriculture include physical mutilation (tail docking, ear tagging and castration), lameness (loss of movement), high lamb mortality rates and long distance transport to the site of slaughter.

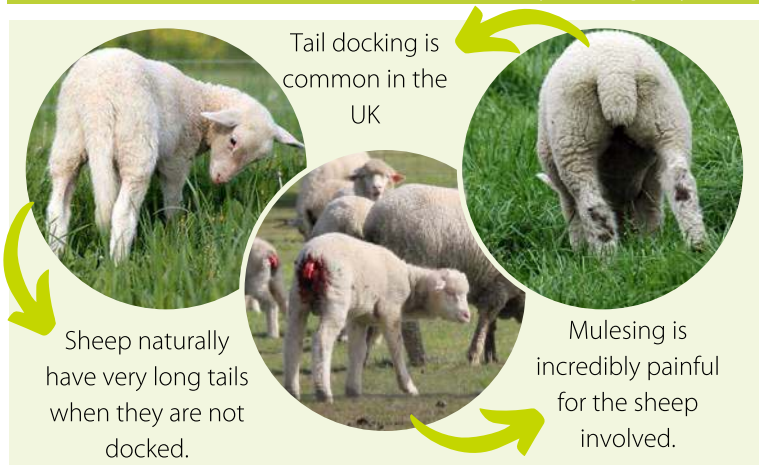
The Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) states that tail docking and castration 'should not be undertaken without strong justification' however both practices are common in sheep farming. Evidence shows that tail docking is not required to reduce the risk of fly strike; regular health checks and 'switch trimming' (trimming the wool around the anus of the sheep) are much less invasive and stressful for the animal involved. Some research also suggests that docking tails too short (as seen in show lambs) may even increase the risk of anal prolapse in later life.

An Australian breed known as the Merino sheep have been bred with particularly wrinkly skin resulting in increased production of wool. Sadly, this also comes with an increased risk of flystrike. Mulesing is a cruel yet common practice in Australia where farmers remove strips of skin around the sheep's buttocks to reduce this risk.

Long distance transport poses another serious animal welfare risk. Each year, around 1.5 million live sheep (as young as four weeks old) are transported across the EU where legislation to allow the animal the rest, feed and water they require for such a stressful journey is frequently ignored. Trucks are overcrowded with insufficient headroom; this may lead to overheating and individuals may not be able to access water at all. This is a highly stressful process for the animals involved.



One of our ewes, Mindy, suffers from a neurological disorder which affects her ability to chew fodder because her upper and lower jaws aren't aligned. To overcome this, our animal care team feed Mindy softened concentrated pellets which require little chewing. We're happy to say that Mindy is doing very well!



Tail docking is common in the UK

Sheep naturally have very long tails when they are not docked.

Mulesing is incredibly painful for the sheep involved.

What can you do to help?

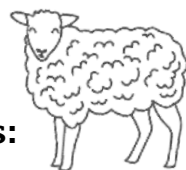
If you are concerned by anything that you have read in this factsheet, you may be wondering what you can do to help.

The only way that you can be sure that you are not contributing to the exploitation of sheep in agriculture is by cutting out all animal products from your lifestyle. You can also encourage farmers to improve their standards of animal welfare by never purchasing intensively farmed meat, especially from other countries where the animals may have been subjected to long distance transportation and varying standards of care.

You may also wish to lend your support to farmed animal welfare campaigns which look to end live animal exports as well as ending intensive farming practices in the UK.



Check out our sources:



- 1] <https://www.msddvetmanual.com/behavior/normal-social-behavior-and-behavioral-problems-of-domestic-animals/social-behavior-of-sheep>
- 2] <https://www.ciwf.org.uk/farm-animals/sheep/sheep-welfare/>
- 3] https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/325125/FAWC_report_on_the_implications_of_castration_and_tail_dockin_g_for_the_welfare_of_lambs.pdf
- 4] <https://agreenerworld.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/TAFS-2-Management-to-Avoid-Tail-Docking-Sheep-v1.pdf>
- 5] <https://hsi.org.au/campaign/animal-welfare-5/mulesing>