

Sheep Care

Sheep are loyal, sensitive, and sweet. With the proper environment and care, they can make wonderful additions to your family. Here, we provide some basic information about sheep and what they require to stay happy and healthy.



"Lucy" Photo credit: Kevin Baker

Basics

The average lifespan of a sheep is about 10-12 years and their normal body temperature ranges from 101-103°F. Size and weight vary depending on breed and sex. Female sheep (called ewes) usually range in weight from 100-150lbs. Male sheep (called wethers if castrated; rams if not) typically weigh between 125-250lbs.

Behavior

Sheep are herd animals and require the company of other sheep to be happy and healthy. By nature, sheep are grazers – meaning that they tend to eat low-growing vegetation – however they will happily snack on brambles and briars, including your prize-winning roses! Keep this in mind when determining how you'll keep your sheep in their space and out of yours.

Space

Your sheep flock will need an enclosed space that offers protection from the elements and predators, as well as room to run, play, and graze. Shelter structures should be waterproof, well ventilated but free from drafts, inaccessible to predators, and provide at least 25 square feet of space per sheep. Your flock's outdoor area should provide at least 40 square feet of space per sheep and be securely enclosed. Shaded areas will help prevent sheep from overheating in warm weather. Local

wildlife or even a neighborhood dog can make easy prey of sheep, so be sure to fortify your standard post-and-plank fencing with strong wire mesh to prevent predators from entering your flock's space.

Diet

Sheep are ruminants, meaning that instead of one simple stomach, they have four stomach chambers – the rumen, reticulum, omasum, and abomasum – each of which has a specialized purpose. The rumen is the largest chamber and fills virtually the entire left side of the body cavity. The rumen and reticulum together act as a fermentation vat where microbes start the digestive process. When a sheep eats, partially chewed material is swallowed and sent to the rumen where it ferments. The sheep then burps this material (“cud”) back into the mouth to chew and swallow it again. This process is repeated until the microbes in the rumen and reticulum have digested the material enough for it to pass to the omasum. The omasum further breaks down food particles and absorbs water and other nutrients. The abomasum is the final chamber, where digestive enzymes are produced and help prepare nutrients for absorption in the intestines.

The microbes in your sheep's guts require the cellulose fiber found in forage (i.e. browse, grass, and hay). For healthy animals, we do not recommend commercial sheep feeds because they often include corn and grain – these ferment faster than forage and disrupt normal digestive function (which can result in death). Access to adequate pasture and/or good quality grass hays such as timothy, will help keep your sheep happy and healthy (alfalfa and other high-protein hays can lead to health problems).

Sheep also require mineral supplements which come loose or in block form, and can be free-fed. Note that mineral supplements formulated for goats contain levels of copper toxic to sheep; if you house goats and sheep together, a multi-species formula without copper should be provided.



Sheep Mama and Amos coexist peacefully with goat Michael

Any changes to your sheep's diet should be made gradually over time, as a sudden switch can cause serious digestive issues. Clean, fresh water should always be available to your sheep.

Health care and maintenance

Consult your local large animal veterinarian to determine the correct vaccines and vaccination schedule for your flock. Common vaccinations will protect against clostridium, tetanus, and rabies.

Hoof maintenance is simple, but very important. A vet can show you how to properly trim your sheep's hooves, and it should be done every four to eight weeks to prevent infections (including hoof rot) and lameness. Shearing is also an important and necessary aspect of sheep care. Wool sheep will need shearing just once or twice a year and we strongly recommend having this done by a trained professional. Your local agricultural extension office or large animal veterinarian should be able to help you find a qualified shearer.



Amos is a wool sheep and needs to be sheared once or twice a year



Lucy and Mama are both hair sheep, who produce very little wool and will shed that wool annually, so do not require shearing

We recommend castrating male sheep in order to avoid the undesirable behaviors (and smells!) associated with amorous intact males. However, castration stops the development of the urinary tract and can leave males vulnerable to blockages caused by urinary calculi (bladder stones). Therefore, it is best to wait until your sheep is at least a few months old before having them castrated.

Internal parasites are common in sheep, but some are more dangerous than others, especially in young, old, or sick individuals. Watch your flock for signs of parasitic infestation including anemia, coughing, diarrhea, fever, and weight loss. Work with

your vet to establish a deworming schedule, and have fecal samples tested quarterly to monitor parasite load.

Perform regular health checks on your sheep! Start when they are young, so they get used to being handled and having all parts of their body touched. At Charlie's Acres, in addition to daily contact and observation, we check our sheep head to tail once a month.

Here's what we look for:

Eyes	discharge, excessive tearing, foreign bodies
Ears	discharge (some wax is normal!), foreign bodies, odors
Nose	discharge, foreign bodies, sores
Mouth	cracked/missing teeth, odors, scabs/sores
Abdomen/udders	lumps/masses, fluid build-up, sensitivity, tautness, discharge/heat/swelling around teats
Penis/vulva	discharge, lumps/masses, discoloration, swelling, odors
Butt/tail	cleanliness, lumps/masses, discoloration
Legs	heat, swelling, joint enlargement/stiffness, sores
Hooves	cracks, heat, debris between toes, sores/wounds, odors, overgrown hooves

Common ailments

The ruminant digestive system supports a delicate balance of microbial life which can be easily upset. Bloat (also called grain poisoning) is a potentially fatal condition caused by overeating rich grain or new pasture. Prevention is key. Take time to gradually adjust your sheep to new food including lush spring pastures, and especially those that are wet with dew, or growing alfalfa or clover. Be careful to store feed securely out of your sheep's reach as they will gorge themselves if given the opportunity. Signs of bloat include distention of the left side of the abdomen (indicating a buildup of gas in the rumen) and obvious discomfort – e.g. calling or crying, grinding teeth, kicking at the abdomen, salivation. Call your vet at the first indication of bloat, as it can kill animals quickly. Talk to your vet about bloat remedies that you can keep on hand in case help is not immediately available.

Caprine Arthritis and Encephalitis (CAE) is a retrovirus usually transmitted vertically from mother to offspring, although it can also be transmitted horizontally among

flock-mates through contact with infected bodily secretions such as blood or feces. CAE can manifest with very serious symptoms, but many infected sheep can live their entire lives without showing signs. When symptoms are present, they can take many forms. The arthritic form is the most common. There can be an acute onset of symptoms – typically in older sheep – including joint soreness, stiffness, and swelling, but more often the arthritis is chronic and progressive. The encephalitic form is less common and most often affects lambs between two and six months of age. Neurological deficiencies may result in poor coordination, head tilt, tremors, twitches, and blindness. Progressive nerve damage leads to muscle weakness and then paralysis. The encephalitic form of CAE is fatal. CAE can also present as pneumonia including a chronic cough, rapid breathing, rough lung sounds, and enlarged lymph nodes. The mammary form of CAE presents as mastitis, where the udders become hard and unable to express milk. Sheep infected with CAE will often exhibit slow progressive weight loss. Blood tests can determine whether or not your sheep has CAE, and other tests can be performed to determine the specific form. Except in the encephalitic form, which is fatal, symptoms and any associated pain can be managed; discuss a treatment plan with your vet.

Caseous lymphadenitis (CL) is a contagious disease that causes large pus-filled abscess on the skin and/or lymph nodes and organs. The external abscesses are usually not painful to the affected sheep, but if they burst or are ruptured, the pus can spread the disease to other members of the flock. The internal form of the disease can affect a sheep's lymphatic function and other organ systems. If you notice that one of your sheep has an abscess, you should isolate the individual and have a vet culture the pus, which can be tested for CL. Work with a sheep-savvy veterinarian to put together a strategic treatment plan.