

RESPONSIBLE SOURCING



Production process

SHEEP (WOOL)

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Animal welfare considerations

- Husbandry procedures such as tail docking and breech modification without pain management
 - Long distance transport
 - Mustering, yarding and shearing
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Definitions

Lamb – sheep who is under 12 months of age or does not have any permanent incisor teeth in wear.

Ewe – adult female breeding sheep.

Ram – adult uncastrated male breeding sheep.

Wether – castrated male sheep.



Sheep are quiet, gregarious and curious animals. They are one of the earliest domesticated animals and likely descend from wild mouflon in Europe and Asia. As a prey animal they have excellent peripheral vision and can see behind themselves without turning their heads. Wool is one of the most widely used animal fibres and mainly harvested by shearing. A sheep's natural lifespan can be up to 12 years, however when used in wool production their lifespan is 6 to 7 years of age.

In Australia, wool-producing sheep are mostly kept in extensive pasture-based systems with supplementary feeding during dry/drought conditions. Sheep are classed according to the fineness of their wool with wool growers generally aiming to breed sheep with a particular type and quality of wool. Some sheep may be shedded rather than pasture based. Shedded sheep are kept in group pens or in individual stalls within a large shed for up to five years. By housing sheep indoors, it is possible to have more control over the selection, feeding, fibre length, fibre diameter, tensile strength and style of their wool. However, sheep are intensely social animals and being part of a flock is fundamental to their wellbeing. Therefore, shedding and individual penning is very stressful.

Rams are often brought onto the property and selected for their wool characteristics and some wool growers may breed their own rams. Rams are put in with the ewe flock for mating and then kept together in separate paddocks once the ewes are pregnant. Once there has been successful conception, a ewe's gestation (pregnancy) lasts around 145 days. Lambing occurs in paddocks with sheep exposed to the elements if appropriate shelter, e.g. trees and shrubs, is not provided. Lambs will stay with their mothers and suckle from them until they are weaned at around 14 weeks of age. Lambs may be born in spring, autumn or winter.

Most Merino breeds (common in wool production), have woolly wrinkles and folds in their skin, particularly around the tail and breech area (back and top of hind legs under tail), which can become moist with urine and contaminated with feces. Blowflies are attracted to this moist area where they lay eggs. Eggs generally hatch into larvae (maggots) within 12–24 hours and feed off the flesh of the sheep for up to 3 days—this is called flystrike, which, if left untreated, is fatal. To address this, the wool industry practices mulesing which is a painful procedure that involves cutting crescent-shaped flaps of skin from around a lamb's breech and tail using sharp shears designed specifically for this purpose. Plain-bodied Merinos have little to no wrinkle and do not require mulesing.

Mulesing is usually carried out during lamb 'marking' when the lamb is between 6 to 10 weeks of age. Lamb marking may not only include mulesing but a series of other painful procedures that are all carried out at the same time: tail docking, castration (removing testicles in ram lambs), ear notching or ear tagging, and vaccinating. Nearly all sheep in Australia are tail docked (unless they are naturally short-tailed breeds) and nearly all male sheep (unless they are destined for breeding) are castrated. Both are painful procedures carried out with either a rubber ring or knife, often without pain relief.

Ewe lambs are raised and join the ewe flock where they will be mated for the first time at around 18 months of age, while male lambs are castrated (wethers) and are kept in separate flocks. All sheep produce wool and are shorn once (or sometimes twice) a year from around 6-8 months of age. Shearing to remove the wool is stressful for sheep as it requires multiple handling and potential for injury from the shearing combs and cutters.

From around 6 years of age, a sheep's wool production begins to drop and when deemed no longer commercially viable to keep for wool harvesting they will be sent for slaughter and sold as mutton. Some wool growers may sell a portion of their flock (mainly older wethers (castrated male sheep) to the live export trade, where the conditions experienced by sheep on the boats as well as at abattoirs in the destination countries (e.g. unstunned slaughter) result in extensive suffering.

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