**Health & Disease Prevention for Sheep**

**Indicators of Good Sheep Health**

Sheep owners should know the signs of good health in their sheep. Good health can be indicated by alertness, regular movement and no sign of lameness, absence of wounds or injuries and regular feeding habits.

It is also important for sheep owners to know the signs that indicate ill health. These can include listlessness or lack of energy, changes in behaviour or posture, lameness, signs of wounds or illness, coughing or unusual panting, rubbing, loss of weight and wool and sometimes separating from the flock.

The following list provides a good basic daily checklist of general guidelines for monitoring the health of sheep:

- A sheep’s stance is steady and centred on strong legs. It is long and tall with a straight back.
- Normal movement means that sheep moves freely and easily with no hesitation, jerking, limping or circling.
- Sheep in distress can “baa” very loudly and repeatedly. However, sheep may vocalize when approached, handled or if specific body parts are touched or palpated. They may also vocalize to avoid being handled. This is normal.
- Sneezing or coughing can indicate pain or respiratory disease.
- A healthy sheep has a good appetite and may eat and drink several times a day.
- A sheep’s wool coat and how it is cared for varies with its breed, age and the season. Hair should not shed in patches. The skin is not dry or cracked.
- A sheep’s skin is smooth and flexible like elastic. Tight skin can be a sign of dehydration.
- Mucous membranes that line the eye, ear, nose, mouth, anus and vagina are moist and pink. If they are dry or white, your sheep may be abnormal.
- Feces look like pellets and do not show any signs of blood, mucus or have a bad odour.
- Urine is clear to yellow in colour.

As well as these indicators of good health, it is imperative that owners know their animal’s individual vital signs. This is known as monitoring the TPR:

- **Temperature** – the normal body temperature is 38°C to 40°C and should be measured rectally.
- **Pulse** – a sheep’s pulse rate can range between 70 to 80 beats per minute. Pulse should be taken by placing your hand over the heart at the floor of the chest. Feel the heart beat with your fingers, not your thumb. The heart rate increases when a sheep becomes excited.
- **Respiration** – the average sheep takes 12 to 20 inhalations a minute and these can be checked by holding your hand or a mirror in front of the sheep’s nostrils. Warmer weather can cause panting.
What does the Code of Practice say about veterinary care for sheep?

- The flock should be inspected regularly to ensure that it is healthy.
- A flock health program should be designed and implemented with the flock veterinarian. Its purpose is to optimize flock productivity through the prevention and control of important diseases and through the integrated management of nutrition, reproduction and lamb survival.
- Programs should be designed with consideration to climate, management system, marketing demands and to the biology of specific diseases.
- Examples of important tools used in a flock health program include vaccines, antibiotics, anthelmentics (drugs that help destroy worms), insecticides, vitamin and mineral supplements, ram breeding soundness evaluations, preventative surgeries, forage analysis and nutritional ration formulation.
- Veterinarians help to ensure that recommended treatment levels are followed if any medication is administered to sheep.
- Hoof trimming, where required, should be part of the flock management program. Trimming should be carried out using proper technique by a competent operator.

Daily inspection or observation of the flock is ideal.
WHAT SHEEP NEED: CARE TO PREVENT AND DETECT DISEASES

If sheep are provided with clean and safe housing or shelters, a good quality pasture, nutritious food and fresh air, they will have fewer health problems. However, sheep should be monitored daily for any signs of physical or behavioural changes.

Sheep need a regular program of health care. Hooves should be trimmed every four to six weeks and shorn once a year in the spring. Older sheep may need specialized care and a person who knows when it is time to euthanize it, intentionally ending its life to relieve pain or suffering.

Some visible signs of illness to watch for in sheep include:

- Loss of appetite
- Weakness or change in posture or movement
- Difficult or fast breathing
- Frequent colic or diarrhea
- Fever, coughing, sneezing, nasal discharge
- Kicking
- Loud distressed sounds or bawling
- Grinding teeth.

Sheep need people who recognize signs of good health and who detect health problems early by watching for signs of disease.
Suspicion of a reportable disease as defined by the Health of Animals Act (Canadian Food Inspection Agency) must immediately be brought to the attention of a veterinarian.

Reportable diseases that may affect sheep include:

- Anaplasmosis
- Anthrax
- Bluetongue
- Foot-and-Mouth Disease
- Mange
- Rabies
- Rinderpest
- Scrapie
- Sheep Scab
- Tuberculosis

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The process for the development of updated Codes can be accessed through the National Farm Animal Care Council at www.nfacc.ca/codes-of-practice/sheep.