



Animal Health & Welfare NI

Sheep Health

AHWNl Flock Health Focus: Time For A Ram MOT? Don't Forget About Rams Pre-Tupping

At this time of year, following weaning, ewes should be assessed and any thin animals prioritised for good grazing. Rams, however, are often overlooked during the summer months. Giving them a thorough pre-breeding check, or 'Ram MOT', at least 10 weeks before tupping provides time to identify and address any problems that could affect fertility. Some issues are not obvious at a glance, so a careful examination now gives rams the best chance to recover before the breeding season begins. If rams are not working to their full potential, this can significantly reduce lamb crop and result in a longer lambing period (due to more repeats). The **Five T's** can be used as a guideline (see AHDB).

Toes

Lameness can have a huge impact on ram fertility, even subclinical lameness that may not be obvious can be very significant. If a ram's locomotion is affected at all, this will result in him being unable to cover as many ewes as he won't travel as far, resulting in a longer lambing period and more barren ewes. Furthermore, stress caused by pain can result in a lower quality semen being produced, and it can take 6-8 weeks for sperm quality to recover to a normal, good quality.

- Check the ram's locomotion: observe him walking on a flat, firm surface from both sides, the front and back. Look for a smooth, symmetrical stride, ensuring he bears equal weight on all four legs without any head bobbing or stiffness.
- Check joints: feel and look closely at the knees, hocks and pasterns for any signs of heat, fluid swelling or any unexplained bumps.
- Foot inspection: lift each foot to check for signs of scald, footrot or CODD (Contagious Ovine Digital Dermatitis); correct any extreme overgrowth that may be forcing an awkward posture (routine foot trimming is not recommended- this should only be done if observation determines that overgrowth is causing lameness); and check for abscesses or toe granulomas.

Teeth

Good dental health is essential in breeding rams to ensure they can maintain condition over the breeding period. A ram's energy requirements tend to be higher during this period as they are working hard. Small dental issues may not be obvious during the summer when they are not actively working, but can become more apparent once breeding begins. If a ram loses too much weight this can result in stamina reduction, immune system suppression, lower libido and reduced semen quality.

- Incisor teeth should meet the dental pad correctly.
- Check for broken, missing or excessively worn teeth.
- Watch out for regurgitation of the cud- this may indicate problems with the molar (back) teeth or arthritis in the jaw.

If a ram has major issues with their teeth, they should be culled, as they won't perform effectively and there is no reversal/treatment for these issues.

Testicles

Checking testicle health is one of the most important parts of a Ram MOT- after all, they play a vital role in producing the next lamb crop! Just because a ram had no fertility issues last season doesn't guarantee that he will have no issues this season.

- Testicles should be evenly sized, firm but springy, move freely in the scrotum and be free from lumps, swelling or any other abnormalities (consult with your veterinarian in these cases).
- Scrotal circumference (this depends on age of ram and breed)- rams with smaller testicles than their age/breed average may not perform as efficiently.

	Mature	Shearlings	Ram Lambs
Lowland	36-38cm	32-34cm	30cm
Hill	34-36cm	30-32cm	28cm

- Examine the prepuce and penis to check that there have been no injuries, infection or ulcers present (again, consult your veterinarian if any abnormalities are noticed)
- Pre-breeding semen tests can be useful to carry out on newly purchased rams, homebred rams before their first breeding season, and also aged rams. Many different factors can affect semen quality. Therefore it is not guaranteed that a ram that has worked in previous years will be as fertile the next season. Contact your veterinarian to check the fertility of your rams.

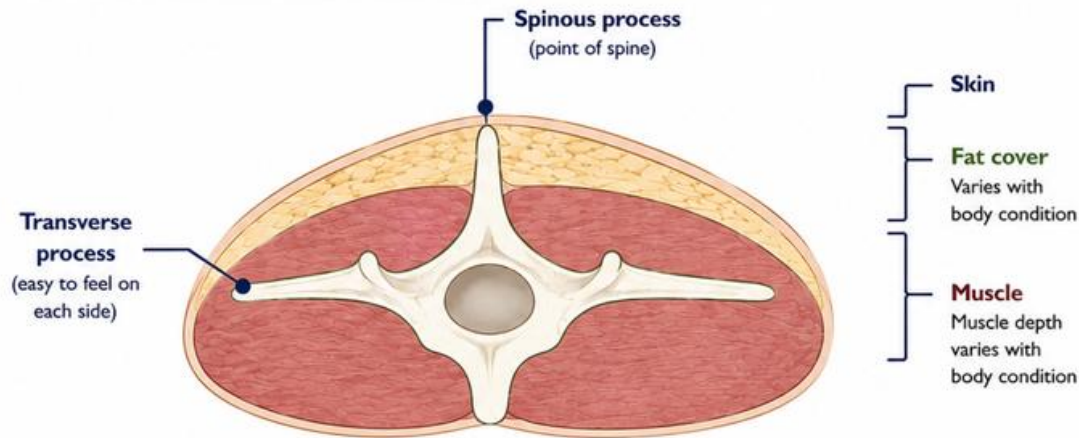
Tone

Rams should be body condition scored (BCS) during this check. Ideally they should enter the breeding season with a BCS of 3.5 to 4. BCS can be performed as per the image below:

BODY CONDITION SCORING (BCS)

— *What Are You Feeling?* —

CROSS SECTION OVER THE LOIN (LUMBAR AREA)



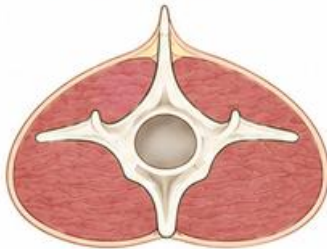
i HOW TO SCORE

Stand behind the sheep.
Place your fingers either side of the spine.
Feel for the spinous and transverse processes.
Assess the amount of cover over them.



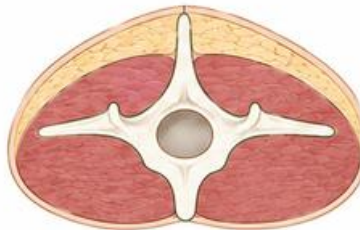
Assess a group of sheep regularly and score the same animals when possible.

BCS 2



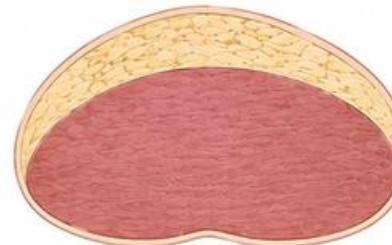
Very little cover over the spine and transverse processes. Bones feel sharp.

BCS 3



A good layer of cover. Spine and transverse processes are smooth and well covered but still detectable with pressure.

BCS 4



Very thick cover. Bones cannot be felt or distinguished.

BODY CONDITION SCORING

Body condition scoring (BCS) is done by feeling specific areas on the sheep's body. **Do not rely on visual assessment alone.**

1. LOIN

On the side, just in front of the top of the back leg.

2. RIBS

Behind the last rib, midway down the side of the sheep.

HOW TO ASSESS

- 1 Stand at the side of the sheep.
- 2 Use moderate pressure with your fingers to feel for cover over bone.
- 3 Assess the two areas: loin and ribs.
- 4 Score each area and then take an overall average BCS for the sheep.



KEY TIP

A good BCS is essential for health, fertility and productivity.

It can take 6-8 weeks to gain 1 BCS, therefore assessing ram condition now is essential to evaluate whether nutrition needs to be improved before breeding.

It's also important to avoid rams becoming overfat: excessive fat deposition around the scrotum can increase testicular temperature which will reduce sperm production and quality.

Treat

Routine health treatments such as dosing and vaccinations should be completed at this point. If your flock has any issues with footrot, the vaccine shouldn't be given any later than 6 weeks before breeding. It can cause transient lameness and could also cause a rise in temperature which may affect fertility.

Ensure that any clostridial/pasteurella vaccines are up to date at this point, as the sudden change in work for the ram can sometimes cause stress and therefore leave them more susceptible to diseases.

Taking a Faecal Egg Count (FEC) at this point can be useful to assess whether any treatments are required, especially if the ram's BCS is lower than desired. Reducing parasite burdens now will give the ram time to ensure it is in prime condition before breeding.

Mineral and vitamin status is often overlooked in rams but is essential to improve fertility, as deficiencies could be contributing to any issues. Getting your veterinarian to blood test rams can provide very useful information that may improve your lamb crop, and will save money and labour by avoiding needlessly buying products.

Waiting until scanning to assess ram fertility is too late- conduct a ram MOT now.



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Ram MOT- The Five T's

