

Tail Docking and Castration in Lambs

What is the purpose of tail docking? Tail docking minimizes the risk of flystrike, which is a condition where blow flies lay eggs on soiled wool or open wounds. After the eggs hatch, the resulting maggots go deep into the sheep's wool and eventually reach the skin where they will begin to eat the flesh. Flystrike is a cyclical condition where once the larvae develop to flies, they will continue to deposit eggs on new or already infected sheep. Flystrike is costly; affecting the sheep's health and resulting in poor growth and wool loss.

How does tail docking work and is it always necessary? The procedure is done to manage fecal soiling around the tail, which reduces the chances of flies laying eggs. Tail docking has been shown to have a protective effect against flystrike in several scientific studies. While not always sufficient to prevent flystrike, in some flocks effective fly control can reduce the need for tail docking, through strategies such as:

Management of
parasites that cause diarrhea

Reduced soiling by
daggings

Strategic timing of
shearing

Frequent flock inspection
for signs of flystrike

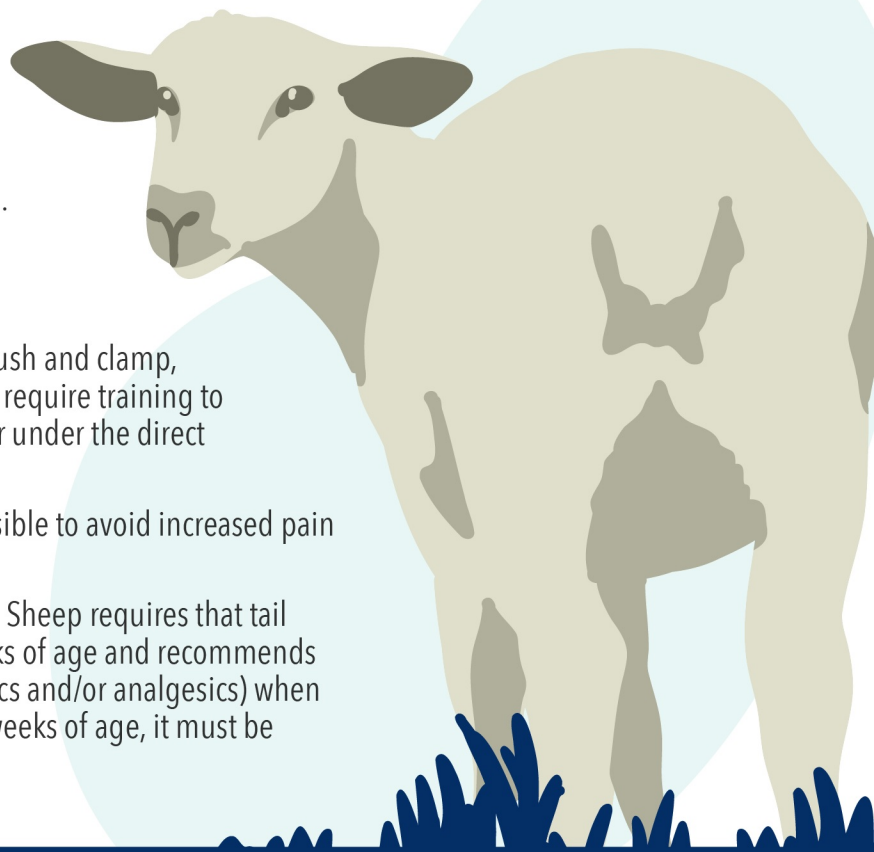
What are Key Considerations When Tail Docking?

Tail length

- The tail must be no shorter than the distal end of the caudal fold (must cover the vulva in females and anus in males).
- If the tail is too short, it can increase the risk of urine staining, rectal prolapses, and even joint-ill.

Competency with technique used

- There are a variety of methods used, including crush and clamp, hot iron removal, and rubber ring. All techniques require training to master and tail docking must be performed by, or under the direct supervision of competent personnel.
- Tail docking should be conducted as early as possible to avoid increased pain associated with any procedure.
- The Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Sheep requires that tail docking with rubber rings be done before 6 weeks of age and recommends administration of pain-relieving drugs (anesthetics and/or analgesics) when and wherever possible. If docking lambs over 6 weeks of age, it must be done with veterinary oversight.



Use pain management

- All tail docking techniques are painful due to the tissue damage and inflammation caused by the procedure. Therefore, it is critical to provide pain control to mitigate the short- and long-term impacts pain has on the lambs.
- When considering a pain control approach, it is likely best to use a local anesthetic at the docking site (to manage the pain that happens when the procedure is performed) and a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug to reduce the impact of chronic pain.

A specific challenge with band castration is pain management following application of the band.

Researchers are exploring the idea of adding local anesthetic to the rubber bands, and have found promising results for long-term pain control using this method.

Castration is commonly practiced on ram lambs to eliminate sexual behavior, reduce fighting and allow male and female lambs to be managed together. When ram lambs are castrated early, there is no risk of ram taint in the meat, improving meat quality.

What are Key Considerations When Castrating?

Competency with technique used

- There are a variety of methods used, including rubber ring, surgical, and burdizzo. All techniques require training to master and tail docking must be performed by, or under the direct supervision of competent personnel.
- No matter the technique used, castration should be done as early as possible to allow for faster healing and reduce the negative impact on the lamb's growth.
- If castration is performed over 10 weeks of age, no matter the technique, it will need to be performed by a veterinarian with appropriate pain control.

Use pain management

- Regardless of technique used, all techniques cause distress and pain to the animal. Many scientific studies have found that castration can increase blood cortisol, and pain related behaviors have been noted after completing the procedure, highlighting the need to use pain control.
- From an economic perspective, there is also evidence that when ram lambs are castrated while using a local anesthetic, lambs had a 20g per day weight gain advantage over the 32 day period following castration.
- Similar to tail docking, a combination of a local anesthetic (where lidocaine is injected into the site of castration) and a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug will be best to manage immediate pain and chronic pain after the procedure has been performed.

Work with your veterinarian to develop a pain management strategy for tail docking and castration that works for you and your farm.