

Sheep – Basic Care

- Sheep are docile in nature, timid and nervous, highly social animals and should be maintained in groups to avoid unnecessary stress.
- A male is called a ram and a female is called a ewe.
- Sheep exhibit strong flocking behavior in pens as well as on pasture. Isolation of individual sheep usually causes anxiety. They tend to follow one another in grazing, bedding down, reacting to obstacles, and feeding. Use of these characteristic behaviors when handling is advantageous.
- During transport animals should be gated off into smaller groups to prevent pileups and death loss.
- Protection from predators such as dogs and coyotes is important in some geographic locations and during certain seasons.
- Artificial shelter is not always necessary because of their adaptability and the insulation of dry wool. For shelter from wind, sheep naturally take advantage of surrounding terrain such as trees and shrubs.
- Sheep are intolerant of mud; access to well-drained shelter is desirable.
- Sheep are generally less aggressive than goats, so they should not be housed together in the same enclosure or the goats will harass the sheep.
- Minimum pen sizes are specified in The Guide for the Care and Use of Agriculture Animals in Agriculture Research and Teaching and the Animal Welfare Regulations. Exceptions must be approved by the IACUC.
- Sheep can get their heads and legs trapped in an inappropriate fence.
- A 42 inch high board or wire fence is generally sufficient to contain most sheep.
- Sheep are ruminants or cud chewing animals. They spend many hours every day chewing their cud. They are natural grazers, preferring short grasses for forage.
- Sheep may overeat, causing serious illness and even death.
- The amount of feed required depends on its size, age, activity level, condition, and physiological state. A fixed amount of feed should be fed at the same times each day.
- Should be fed a high quality, commercially prepared, nutritionally complete, pelleted diet. It can be supplemented with hay or hay cubes.
- Mature sheep can consume as much as a gallon of water a day. Fresh water should be available ad libitum.
- A salt or mineral block formulated for sheep should also be available.
- A sheep should never be grasped or pulled by the wool.
- To catch a lone sheep in a pen, work it into a corner. Approach slowly with arms extended to form a visual barrier. Quickly block its path and when close enough, place one hand under the lower jaw and lift the head up. The other hand is placed behind the head or behind the tail.
- When captured, a sheep will usually stand still.
- Set the sheep on its rump with its back against your legs (tipping). This places the sheep off balance and will sink under its own weight.
- Sheep are generally shorn once a year, in late winter or early spring.
- For more specific species information including physiologic data, husbandry and breeding requirements, or procedural information, please contact the Office of Laboratory Animal Care (865-974-5634).