

Hobby farmers, worms and SHEEP

Poor feed and worm disease are the two most common sheep health and welfare problems on hobby farms. It is important that everyone who has even just a few sheep has at least a basic understanding of worm disease and how to manage it.

Worm Test collection kits are available from the Animal Health Laboratory DPIPWE
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How could my sheep get worm disease?

1. From contaminated pasture. Worms live in the sheep's gut. They lay eggs that are passed out in the dung. These eggs then hatch out into larvae which, in the sort of climatic conditions we have in Tasmania, can survive several months in the pasture. When sheep graze contaminated pasture, they ingest the larvae along with the pasture. It is this cycle that can result in the buildup of heavy worm infestations in both your sheep and your pasture, unless you actively manage the situation (see below).
2. By bringing wormy sheep onto your property. If you buy or agist sheep (or borrow someone else's ram), they will bring with them whatever worm problems are present on the property they have just come from. That is why it is so important to give all your new arrivals a "quarantine drench" and, where possible, hold them off your pasture for 6 to 8 hours after that quarantine drench. Of course, if they have been in transit for a few hours you will need to give them some hay and water during that 6 to 8 hours.

How do I minimise the risk of worm disease on my property ?

1. Choose the right breed. For the damper climates, some breeds of sheep are much more resistant to worm disease than others. Merinos and merino crosses are more suited to drier climates and are much more susceptible to worm disease (and a

range of other problems) in such a damp climate. Of the more common breeds in Tasmania, the ones that have the best natural resistance to worm disease are the Romney, the Suffolk and the Perendale, but most of the British breeds have a reasonable natural resistance to worms.

2. Maintain your sheep in good condition. Sheep that are under-nourished are far more susceptible to worms. Please understand that it is not easy to assess the body condition of a woolly sheep from a distance – you have to feel along the backbone to get any idea of whether your woolly sheep is in good condition.
3. Supplementary feed. There are times of the year when good pasture is often in short supply – late winter and late summer usually. You can help maintain the sheep's good condition by giving some "top up" ration of pellets or oats and hay. It is important to introduce pellets or oats into their diet gradually – too much too quickly can make them very sick. If you feed out in the same area each time, you should put it in a trough of some kind, so you can clean it out before feeding each time – that way you will reduce the risk of your sheep picking up worms from what will become a worm-contaminated area. Please note that pellets for other species are not suitable for sheep – for example some cattle pellets contain copper at a level that could kill sheep. Also, it is illegal to give pig feed and most types of poultry feed to sheep (or any ruminants), because they contain some meat or meat product.
4. **Do a worm test.** This is the only surefire way of determining if your sheep have a worm disease problem in the making. It will enable you to act before the problem builds and starts to make your sheep sick. Collecting samples for the worm test is easy and instructions come with the worm test kits, which are available from **DPIPWE** (contact the **Animal Health Laboratory** on **03 6777 2111** or

specimenreception@dpiwwe.tas.gov.au), your local vet and from most rural merchandisers. Results of the test are normally available 24 hours after the samples arrive at the laboratory.

5. Pre-emptive drenching. If your sheep are “dry” – i.e. you won’t be using them for breeding – in most hobby farm situations, a drench at shearing time is usually sufficient. If your sheep are for breeding, a drench around 4 weeks before lambing should see the ewe through the stress periods of late pregnancy and lamb raising. Lambs should be drenched a week or two before weaning. It is important that after you have drenched your sheep, they are put onto clean pasture and the old pasture spelled for as long as possible. If you find you need to drench more often than outlined here, your worm management plan is failing and you should get advice from your vet before the problem gets even bigger.

How do I know if my sheep have worm disease?

If your sheep have access to good feed yet are still losing condition, worm disease is a strong possibility. In many cases, affected sheep also scour (i.e. have diarrhoea) but not all wormy sheep scour and not all scouring sheep have worms! Absence of scours does not mean absence of worms.

A proper worm test is the only way to diagnose worm disease with certainty (see above).

How do I treat worm disease?

Drench all your sheep (and goats and alpacas if you have any) and put them onto a clean pasture. If that fixes the problem, it was worm disease and you need to work out what went wrong with your worm management plan. If they do not start to regain condition within a few days after being drenched (and they have access to good feed), the problem is something else and you should call your vet without delay.

When drenching your animals, it is most important to give them the right dose. Underdosing can cause drench resistance (see below) and that can happen if the drench gun sucks a bit of air or the sheep dribbles the drench out. Always check the label for the correct dose – different drenches have different doses. If you have only a very few sheep, you can usually buy individual drench doses from your local vet or from whoever shears your sheep.

What is drench resistance and why do I need to know about it?

Drench resistance is a big problem that you don’t want on your property. It means that worms will survive drenching and, if that happens, worm management will be an awful lot more difficult for you. It is usually caused by underdosing, so that the “tougher” worms survive the drench and breed, thereby accelerating the problem. To minimise the risk of developing drench resistance on your property, you need to do the following

1. Make sure that, when you drench, you give the correct dose. Underdosing is the major cause of drench resistance.
2. Use drenches known to be effective on your farm (work with your vet and the lab to do testing). Drenches with a combination of active ingredients may be required.
3. If you find that a single annual drench for “dry sheep” or two drenches a year for lambing ewes and weaners are not sufficient to beat worm disease, don’t just increase the drenching. It means you have a significant problem brewing up and you should get the help of your vet to get on top of that problem before it gets on top of you.

There is a lot of information about managing worm disease, and in particular how to prevent it, on the DPIWWE website. You’ll find a special page for the hobby farmer that gives you a lot of practical tips on how to drench your sheep. Just go to www.dpiwwe.tas.gov.au and follow the links to biosecurity, animal health, sheep disease and internal parasites.

There is also a lot of useful information about worms and sheep on the Wormboss website - www.wormboss.com.au

Worm disease can be a serious animal welfare issue. If you see skinny sheep, please report to DPIWWE on 1300 368 550 or the RSPCA on 1300 139 947

