



WENSUM VALLEY VETS FARM NEWSLETTER SEPTEMBER 2023

Ram Care:

In the next few months, many shepherds will be thinking about the 'tupping' season – i.e., releasing a fertile male amongst a flock of female ewes/gimmers.

With sheep gestation being between 142 – 152 days (around 5 months) tupping time may vary between farms depending on when the lambing period is desired.

In the next few months therefore, ensuring your rams are fit, sound and healthy is essential for good performance.

Things to Consider:

- **Good nutrition** – rams should ideally be in a body condition score of 3.5-4/5. They will expend a lot of energy in a short period, dropping a considerable amount of condition. A high protein ration will help with condition and support mature sperm production increasing fertility.
- **Temperature:** The temperature of ram testicles should be cooler than that of the core – therefore during warmer times, ensuring wool is trimmed away to aid cooling will be beneficial. Temperatures within the testicles that are too high can affect sperm production.
- **Genitalia:** Examination of the reproductive tract around breeding time is essential – palpate the scrotum checking for any sign of pain or irregularities. They should be of even size and consistency and feel firm to touch. Examine the prepuce and penis end for any signs of blood or abnormal discharge that may indicate infection. Scrotal circumference for a mature ram should be >36cm.
- **Vaccinations:**
Against Clostridial disease +/-
Pasteurella should be administered around 10 weeks prior to tupping.



Key Points About Ewe Pregnancy:

Pregnancy is 142 – 152 days (5 months) with timing varying due to nutrition, number of foetuses, age and environment.

Sheep are 'short day breeders' meaning they begin cycling with reduced daylight time (Autumn)

Stress can have an adverse effect on pregnancy so ensure all interventions e.g. parasite control/vaccinations occurs before

You can consider using a 'teaser' ram or artificial synchronisation to enable a shorter lambing period due to synchronised hormonal cycling amongst ewes

Fertility Testing:

We are well equipped to perform both bull and ram fertility testing, with electroejaculation as an option to assess sperm vitality and therefore breeding potential.

This involves collecting semen and grading the sperm under a microscope to assess quantity, quality, structure and mobility.

It is rare for complete infertility in rams, however as many as 30% of rams are 'sub-fertile' which may result in more barren ewes and a longer lambing period.

Fertility testing assesses sperm characteristics as an indicator of breeding potential. Factors such as libido and ability to mount (affected by lameness etc.) can only be assessed by observation and should not be overlooked.

Rams should be examined 2 months before the start of the breeding season. Note that ill health can affect sperm production for up to 6 weeks. Unfortunately, some rams do not respond well to the electro ejaculator meaning we cannot obtain an adequate sample. If this occurs, you will have to try again later.



The above images show an electro-ejaculator for bull fertility testing (top picture), vs one for ram fertility testing (bottom picture)

Many flocks use around 3 rams to every 100 ewes –ram lambs will serve fewer ewes than mature adult/yearling rams. Don't run ram lambs and mature rams together – mature rams will dominate and may injure younger animals.

Most Common Conditions Affecting Ram Fertility:

- **Poor health** – due to poor nutrition, parasitism, lameness etc. Ensure selected rams have:
 - Sound feet and legs
 - Good body condition score – not too fat or too thin
 - Been treated for parasitism (external and internal)
 - Shorn 6-8 weeks before start of breeding season – heat stress can reduce fertility
- **Epididymitis** – The most common cause of infertility or reduced fertility in rams. Primarily caused by **Brucella ovis** bacteria with occasionally other bacterial species too.
 - Diagnosis can be made by external palpation – pain on palpation, enlarged epididymis (palpated at the bottom of each testicle as a knob like structure). Culturing of semen and blood testing are methods of diagnosis of cause of condition.
 - Prevented by giving all rams a fertility investigation before purchase and use.
 - Treatment is rarely effective as damage already done is permanent.

**Brucella ovis is not transmissible to humans unlike other species of Brucella*

If you are interested in finding out more about our services involving ram health and fertility testing, please give us a call on 01328 864444 or email us at info@wensumvalleyvets.co.uk