

# 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 sheep 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. This condition is very costly, resulting in economic losses associated with loss of wool and growth.

**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  
dagging

Strategic timing of  
shearing

Frequent flock inspection  
for signs of flystrike

## What are Key Considerations When Tail Docking?

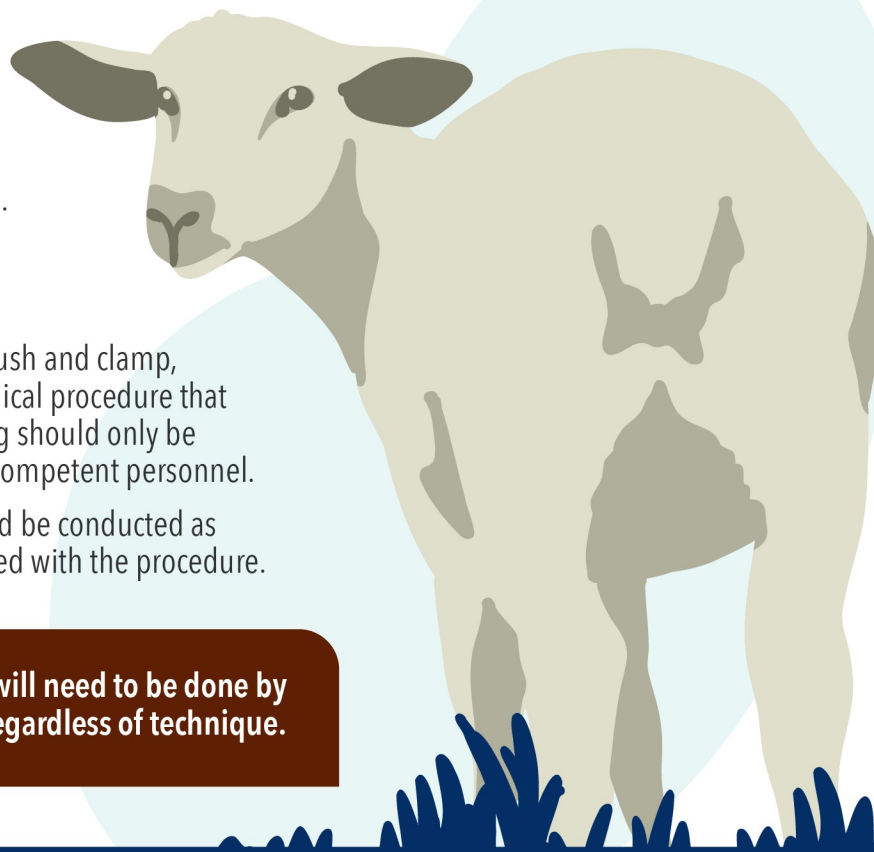
### Tail length

- The tail should 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. Each is a technical procedure that requires training to master. Therefore, tail docking should only be completed by or under the direct supervision of competent personnel.
- No matter the technique used, tail docking should be conducted as early as possible to avoid increased pain associated with the procedure.

If docking is performed over 6 weeks of age it will need to be done by a veterinarian with appropriate pain control, regardless of technique.



## 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 right 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. Recently, researchers have explored an approach that adds anesthetic directly into the rubber bands and have found promising results for long-term pain control using this method.

**Castration** is commonly practiced in ram lambs to eliminate sexual behavior and reduce fighting as well as allow male and female lambs to be managed together. In addition, there is no risk of ram taint in rams that have been castrated, which improves meat quality. There are few alternatives to performing castration and it is a necessary practice in the industry.

## What are Key Considerations When Castrating?

### Competency with technique used

- There are a variety of methods used, including rubber ring, surgical, and burdizzo. Each is a technical procedure that requires training to master. Therefore, castration should only be completed by, or under the direct supervision of competent personnel.
- No matter the technique used, castration should be conducted as early as possible to avoid increased pain as lambs age. Castration at an early age also allows faster healing and less of an impact on lamb 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 can 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 some 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 infused 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.**