

# Start thinking about rams well ahead of upcoming tupping time

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**When preparing for your next crop of lambs, it is all too easy to focus on the ewes and neglect the rams. The ewes are only half the story as rams unfit to do the job will negatively affect your scanning percentage.**

As well as having lots of lambs on the ground, fit and fertile rams are also essential for a tight lambing pattern. This can simplify pre lambing ewe nutrition and lamb management by ensuring stock is at the same stage of the production cycle at the same time. A fertile ram should get 85% of 60 ewes in lamb within the first 17-day cycle and leave less than 2% barren after six weeks.

There are very few completely sterile rams, but up to 30% of rams may be subfertile, meaning they get fewer ewes in lamb and take longer to do so. If the infertile rams happen to be the more dominant individuals then this can lead to even more significant losses.



Consider pre-sale nutrition and quarantine requirements when buying in a ram (left), but all rams, regardless of how many breeding seasons they've done (above) should be checked for the five Ts.

## Ram power

Many farms are running as few as 30 ewes to each ram but fully fit and fertile rams should be able to mate twice this number. Some rams, depending on breed, age, topography and stocking densities will serve up to 100 ewes. Ask yourself how many rams you need. It will save you money to keep fewer rams and ensure those you do keep are highly fertile, fit and bred for longevity – see table.

Ensuring they have the correct conformation will also go a long way towards minimising the risk of a ram breaking down or developing arthritis early. Make sure their toes point straight forward, their back legs are not too

straight (when viewed from the side) and that their pasterns are not dropped. If you need to increase your ram power, plan ahead. Try not to buy a ram one week before he needs to work,

as he will need at least three weeks to adjust to a new ration and four weeks for effective quarantining. Rams are often overfed running up to sales and if put straight out to work without concentrate and with no transition they will melt away before your eyes. Always ask for an honest description of the pre-sale ration. Source rams on the farm of origin wherever possible and look for maedi visna accreditation and caseous lymphadenitis (CLA) monitoring.

Whether your ram has been recently bought or resident on the farm for more than one breeding season, always remember the five Ts - tone, toes, treat, teeth and testicles. This process should begin two to three months before tupping.

**Tone.** Aim for rams to have a body condition score of 3.5-4 so they are fit not

fat. When handling them, the loin muscles should feel full and rounded and the horizontal processes of spine should not be detected. Overfat rams are often lazy and have a poor libido, and the scrotum will be surrounded in fat, which raises the temperature of the testicles and causes poor quality sperm.

**Toes.** Every ram should have all four feet inspected and any lameness problems sorted well in advance. Look for signs of stiffness or arthritis too, as any pain will affect a ram's willingness to work and, therefore, the scanning percentage.

**Treat.** Ensure clostridial and other farm-specific vaccinations (bluetongue, louping ill etc) are up-to-date well in advance of the breeding season.

**Teeth.** Check your rams' mouths to ensure they have good enough teeth to fuel them for the season ahead. The teeth should be complete with good occlusion of the teeth to the dental pad. The jaw should not have any heat or swelling. Look out for dropping of food or drooling, as these may be subtle signs of disease.

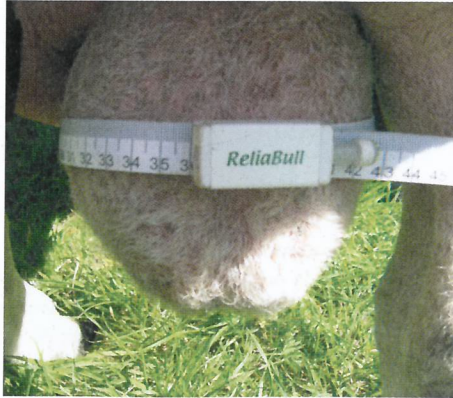
**Testicles.** Ensure rams are shorn early, as uncomfortably hot rams will lie down for longer, squashing their scrotums and overheating their testicles, resulting in poor quality semen. The testes themselves should be shorn to ensure adequate heat loss. Careful palpation of the testicles is essential, to check the testes are freely moveable within the scrotal sac. Feel for any heat or swelling, asymmetry, hard or soft areas, and check for scrotal mange. The testicles should have the consistency of a flexed biceps muscle and feel the

Ram cost per ewe mated				
Longevity (number of mating seasons)	Number of ewes covered			
	40 ewes	60 ewes	80 ewes	100 ewes
1	£9.17	£6.11	£4.58	£3.67
2	£4.58	£3.06	£2.29	£1.83
3	£3.06	£2.04	£1.58	£1.22
4	£2.29	£1.53	£1.15	£0.92

Source: AHDB Beef & Lamb. Based on ram cost of £550/head and a lambing percentage of 150%.



same all over. The circumference of the scrotum at its widest point will vary between breeds but a ram lamb should measure approximately 32cm, a shearling 34cm and a mature ram 36cm. Check



*Scrotum measurements vary between breeds but a mature ram should be around 36cm.*

the ram's penis for signs of abnormal discharge or injury and ensure it protrudes freely from the prepuce. The vermiform appendage (the wormlike projection on the end of the penis) must be free of adhesions. There should be no brisket sores, which may affect the ability of the ram to mount.

## Fertility testing

Fertility testing is essential for farmers wishing to drive down ram costs and maximise their ram-to-ewe ratios – and this insurance against poor productivity is becoming routine in many flocks. It is very risky to run 80-100 ewes per ram if the rams are of an unknown quantity. Even a slight fever in the two months before tupping can adversely affect fertility, as sperm take more than 60 days to mature. A veterinary pre-breeding examination will

involve assessment of all the above and should include assessment of a semen sample.

Semen is collected using an electroejaculator and assessed on farm for density, gross motility and progressive motility (swimming in the right direction). Smears will be made and examined for any sperm defects, although this is often done back at the practice. Testing is best done six to eight weeks prior to the breeding season. Too late and any defects may not be able to be corrected in time. Too early and the risk of a problem between testing and tupping becomes more likely.

Speak to your vet for further advice but, more often than not, the cost of this annual pre breeding fertility examination is offset by the savings made in ram costs.

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