

# Focus on body condition scores for successful flushing of ewes

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**Moving ewes to pastures with longer, lusher grass is the traditional way to increase energy intakes and boost ovulation rates before letting the tups in. Although this conventional wisdom has a lot of truth, more recently and because of better data recording and usage, it is not necessarily always true.**

A low plane of nutrition, which sustains a low body condition or leads to a loss in body condition, reduces the secretion of gonadotrophic hormones and may thus have an effect on fertility, first at the individual animal level (one ewe either will or won't conceive) but more noticeably at the flock level (the percentage of a flock which have conceived, a figure that becomes more reliable the larger the flock is and can be fractions of a percent).

A plane of nutrition which maintains body condition at 2.5-3.5 after weaning

## Other factors affecting the success of flushing

Our vet practice targets trace elements investigations at copper, cobalt and selenium, and commonly unearths deficiencies. Supplementation of deficient animals in a timely fashion leads to a greater chance of conceiving. Copper supplementation is also important on farms where there has been a diagnosis of swayback in new born lambs.

As sheep are particular good at storing copper, no supplementation with it should go ahead without a thorough appreciation of the farm and sheep status. Over-supplementation with copper (a common practice when feeding mineralised cattle cake) will lead to copper being stored in the liver and an acute copper crisis (illness or death) may occur many months later, often precipitated by lambing.

Chronic parasite infections such as liver fluke and worms may lead to poor health leading up to tupping. A test called the coproantigen ELISA test is available for determining fluke infection and is a great tool to have in our armoury.

Also remember the importance of checking teeth and feet are in good order and udders are all square. And although this article is about flushing ewes, don't forget the tups!

## Body condition score pre-mating and recommended grass access

Ewe body condition score		Sward height (cm)	Kg DM /ha
Low	2.5 & less	5-7	2,250-2,650
Good	3.0-3.5	4	1,950
High	4+	3	1,650

is desirable, unless ewes are excessively fat, where a reduced energy intake may be needed to slim them down a bit. Early lambing ewes that are fed hard to support milk production can have a tendency to get fat if they have access to lush grass when their peak milk production had eased back. This is something to watch out for, particularly in hill breeds and hill cross breeds such as Mules, which are incredibly efficient at energy utilisation and storing energy as fat when it is in excess.

## Condition consistency

Ewes respond optimally to flushing at 2.5-3.5 body condition score, rather than at one extreme or the other. It is vital to learn and appreciate how to do body condition scoring. While we all may debate the finer points of whether an individual ewe is a fraction of a condition score higher or lower than one of our fellows thinks, the flock level is the one that is important. If the same person can condition score, the results will be consistent and trends can be spotted. At the flock level, knowing what the average condition score was, and is now, are real headline figures.

The period of several months between weaning and re-mating may allow for ewes to be on a low plane of nutrition, to maintain a body condition of 2.5-3.5 or



*Ewes must be handled to correctly score them. Even recently shorn animals can look fatter than they are!*

slim them down from 4-5. If ewes are thin or emaciated for whatever reason they should always be fed to improve condition. It takes about six weeks of good feeding to improve by one condition score.

Different body conditions affect flushing:-

- Fat ewes and ewes at the higher end of good are not really found to respond too well to flushing.
- Thinner ewes that are fed to be in better condition at the start of the breeding season are more likely to have multiple ovulations and bear twins or triplets.
- Thin ewes transferred from maintenance feeding to a higher level for four to six weeks, beginning two to three weeks before the tups are let loose, can have a 10-20% higher lambing percentage.

Therefore the success, or not, of flushing is associated more with improved rather than improving body condition, and could just as well be obtained by preventing the depletion of reserves. The exception is thin ewes where improving their body condition is essential – which again shows the importance of scoring your ewes.



*The field in the foreground, compared to the one behind, has been grazed by many sheep with lambs at foot, so is good for over-conditioned ewes.*