

Farm safety - sheep and shearing

Handling sheep can cause a variety of manual injuries, ranging from strains and sprains through to degenerative joint and muscle damage, and broken bones. Badly designed shearing sheds and yards can be dangerous.

Make your farm a safe working environment by identifying potential hazards and modifying the layout, equipment and safety practices of your operation. This will ensure that workers are less likely to injure themselves and your sheep.

Inexperienced or unfit workers are more likely to injure themselves, so it is important to train your staff thoroughly about safe handling and encourage them to maintain their fitness by exercising and eating well.

Risk assessment

You can assess potential risks in many ways:

- Walk through all sheep-handling areas and look for hazards.
- Consult with farm safety advisers from WorkSafe Victoria – they may provide free consultations.
- Read over injury records to pinpoint recurring dangers.
- Talk over safety issues with other sheep handlers.
- Remember that inexperienced or unfit workers are at greater risk of manual handling injuries.

Preventing manual handling injuries

You can reduce the risk of manual-handling injuries in many ways. Ensure that workers:

- Remain hydrated by drinking plenty of non-alcoholic and non-caffeinated fluids. Water is the best option.
- Exercise regularly to improve and maintain fitness, strength and stamina.
- Encourage those working on your farm to improve their health and fitness (especially unfit workers). Only allow a worker to perform a task if you are confident they can handle it.
- Eat a well-balanced diet – always provide healthy, nutritious meal options if you are required to feed workers.
- Stretch and warm up before shearing with gentle exercises and cool down afterwards with slow, continuous stretches – your doctor or physical therapist can provide advice about safe stretching to avoid further injury.
- Use the free *Farming fit* DVD to help farm men and women remain fit. Available from the National Centre for Farmer Health.
- Take regular breaks to alleviate fatigue.
- Protect your workers' backs by paying attention to good workplace and equipment design (ergonomics), posture and using supportive braces.
- When handling a sheep, keep the animal close to your body and avoid having to lift the animal. If required to lift, use the proper technique by keeping your back straight, feet shoulder width apart and lift with your thigh muscles.
- Work in yards and handling areas that are designed to minimise the handling and lifting of sheep.
- Always get help when lifting heavy loads, or use a hoist.

A safer working environment

General suggestions for improving the safety of sheep handling include:

- Use non-slip surfaces on all tracks and walkways.
- Design a yard layout that allows sheep to move freely.
- Fit protective coverings (shade and shelter) to working and drafting races.
- Build yards on inclines rather than flat ground as they tend to drain better and sheep prefer running up a slight incline.
- Ensure adequate and even light.
- Regularly maintain all equipment and make sure appropriate safety guards are used.
- Be aware of high noise levels – where possible, use hearing protection, choose quieter equipment, install mufflers and noise covers, place equipment away from workers and limit the volume of radios and CD players.
- Ensure that all workers use personal protective equipment (PPE) such as goggles and gloves when grinding cutters.
- Use and store chemicals correctly according to the manufacturers' instructions.
- Use a cradle when marking or handling lambs.
- Understand sheep diseases and promptly treat any animal with symptoms.
- Be aware that animals can transmit diseases to humans via saliva, urine or contact with skin or wounds.
- Practise good personal hygiene. Always wash your hands before eating and after handling sheep.

Using chemicals safely

When jetting, dipping, drenching or treating for flystrike, the following safety procedures should be observed:

- Ensure that all workers use recommended safety equipment, such as skin protection, ear and eye protection and a face mask.
- Use chemicals correctly according to the manufacturers' instructions and make sure you have read the labels and Material Safety Data Sheet (MSDS) for the product being used.
- Keep all equipment in good repair and replace faulty parts.
- Immediately see your doctor if you experience headaches, nausea or other ill effects after using chemicals for dipping, jetting or drenching of blow fly treatments.
- Report any adverse events to the Australian Pesticides and Veterinary Medicines Authority (APVMA).

Mustering sheep

Safety suggestions for **mustering sheep** include:

- Plan the muster in advance and talk the plan through with your workers.
- Assume that every ram will act aggressively and unpredictably.
- Don't rush the muster – a calm approach results in a calmer mob.
- Use sheep dogs rather than horses or motorbike riders to control the mob.

Safety issues in the shearing shed

You can make your shearing shed a safer environment for you and your workers in the following ways:

- Make sure the shed is well ventilated and well lit.
- Ensure all guards are on all shearing machinery.
- Space your workers out to avoid clashing of downtubes.
- Use electric motors on wool presses to reduce noise pollution.
- Regularly maintain all equipment and keep in good repair with safety equipment in place.
- Make sure that emergency stop buttons are easily reached.
- Keep all walkways free from obstructions.
- Make sure catching pen floors are dry and non-slip.
- Keep other workers, children and dogs out of the shed.

- Discuss the ability to sedate your rams when shearing, with your veterinarian.
- Keep a stocked and up-to-date first aid kit in a readily accessible place.
- Regularly check and maintain fire-fighting equipment, such as extinguishers.
- Thoroughly train new workers and children.

Draw up an emergency plan

An emergency plan is vital. Some suggestions include:

- Ensure easy access to a suitable and well-stocked first aid kit.
- Make sure at least one person on the farm is trained in first aid.
- Keep emergency numbers and correct addresses next to the telephone.
- Plan routes to the nearest hospital – make sure the hospital has an emergency department.
- Regularly talk through your emergency plan with your family and other workers.
- Make sure your children understand what to do in an emergency.

Where to get help

- Your doctor.
- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000) for an ambulance– know your correct address
- National Centre for Farmer Health Tel. (03) 5551 8533
- WorkSafe Victoria Tel. (03) 9641 1444 or 1800 136 089
- Victorian Farm Safety Centre Tel. (03) 5335 3703
- Department of Primary Industries Tel. 136 186
- Farmsafe Australia Tel. (02) 6752 8218

Things to remember

- Handling sheep can cause a variety of manual injuries, ranging from strains and sprains through to broken bones.
- Reducing the risk of manual-handling injuries includes attention to posture, correct lifting techniques and maintaining fitness.
- Walk through all sheep-handling areas and look for hazards, then make the necessary changes to improve safety.
- Inexperienced workers are at greater risk of injury, so make sure they are thoroughly trained.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

National Centre for Farmer Health

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