

Castration and tail docking in lambs

SUMMARY

Castration and tail docking are often performed as routine husbandry procedures. These procedures are painful and farmers should consider whether they are necessary. This document goes on to discuss:

- The methods of castration and tail-docking
- The welfare code recommendations relevant to the methods
- The legislation covering the techniques
- Castration and tail docking in organic production systems

Introduction

The Farm Animal Welfare Council (FAWC) report on the implications of tail docking and castration on the welfare of lambs (2008) noted that pain relief reduces the impact of castration and tail docking on welfare and should be used when and wherever possible. Any decisions about pain management and

its relief should be made in discussion with a veterinary surgeon. In addition many farmers should consider whether castration is necessary in fattening lambs e.g. those sold before December (8-9 month-old) when pregnancy is not a major concern.



Castration

There are three main methods of castration in ram lambs: 1) rubber ring (elastrator); 2) emasculator; and 3) open or surgical method



Figure 1

1) The rubber ring or elastrator (*figure 1*) is applied to the scrotum, above the descended testes, with care taken not to cover the lamb's rudimentary teats. The tight ring disrupts blood supply to the scrotum, causing it to die and eventually drop off.

3) The testes are completely removed in the surgical method. The bottom third of the scrotum is cut off with a knife or scalpel and the testes are pulled out. The wound is allowed to drain naturally. The open surgical method of castration puts the lamb at the greatest risk of infection and also during fly season "fly strike". The FAWC report (1994) concluded that surgical castration caused significantly more distress than other methods and their 2008 report noted that research had found that the greatest pain response of all methods occurred with surgical castration. Because of this, surgical castration (i.e using a knife) of any age of lamb may now only be done by a veterinary surgeon (see The Prohibited Procedures on Protected Animals (Exemptions) (Scotland) Regulations 2010).



Figure 2

2) The Burdizzo (*figure 2*) is one brand of bloodless castrator. These instruments are used to crush the spermatic cords, causing irreversible damage to the vessels supplying the scrotum. Each cord is clamped separately. Sometimes, these instruments result in incomplete castration. Small lambs are more difficult to do. Some instruments can be used in combination with a rubber ring. The cords are clamped immediately before or after the application of the ring. With the combination method, each cord may be clamped separately or the clamp may be applied across the neck of the whole scrotum. Farmers considering the use of the combination method should always seek guidance and training from their veterinary surgeon.

Welfare codes recommendations on castration

- Farmers and shepherds should consider carefully whether castration is necessary within any particular flock. Castration is unlikely to be necessary where lambs will be finished and sent to slaughter before reaching sexual maturity. The procedure should only be carried out when lambs are likely to be retained after puberty and where it is necessary to avoid welfare problems associated with the management of entire males. Account should be taken not only of the pain and distress caused by castration but also the stress imposed by gathering and handling, and the potential risk of infection. For very young lambs gathered in large groups, there is a real risk of mismothering, which may lead ultimately to starvation and death.

Castration should not be performed on lambs until the ewe/lamb bond has become established.

- Castration may only be carried out in strict accordance with the law (see box below). The procedure should be performed by a competent, trained operator. Once a lamb is over three months of age, castration may only be performed by a veterinary surgeon using a suitable anaesthetic.

The law - castration

Under the Protection of Animals (Anaesthetics) Act 1954, as amended, it is an offence to castrate lambs which have reached three months of age without the use of an anaesthetic. Furthermore, the use of a rubber ring, or other device, to restrict the flow of blood to the scrotum or tail, is only permitted without an anaesthetic if the device is applied during the first week of life.

Under the Veterinary Surgeons Act 1966, as amended, only a veterinary surgeon may castrate a lamb which has reached the age of three months.

Under The Prohibited Procedures on Protected Animals (Exemptions) (Scotland) Regulations 2010 surgical castration of any age of lamb may only be done by a veterinary surgeon.

Tail docking

Common methods of tail docking in the past included; 1) the rubber ring “elastrator” 2) cauterization i.e. docking with a hot iron 3) emasculator 4) cutting the tail off with a knife (no longer legal) or 5) a combination of these methods.

- 1) The elastrator (*figure 1 opposite*) is a tool for bloodless docking. It is used to apply a rubber ring to the tail. The ring cuts off blood supply to the tail, eventually causing it to shrivel and fall off.
Animals (Exemptions) (Scotland) Regulations 2010
- 2) A traditional hot iron or an electric docking iron cuts and cauterizes the tail simultaneously, so these continue to be permitted for use by farmers. Cutting the tail off with a knife alone causes bleeding which may be excessive if not controlled and risks infection and prolonged wound healing, so is not permitted by farmers. Surgical docking using a knife or scalpel may only be carried out by a veterinary surgeon (see The Prohibited Procedures on Protected
- 3) An emasculator has both a crushing and cutting mechanism. The crushing mechanism seals the blood vessels on the remaining tail stub, while the cutting mechanism removes the tail. A bloodless castrator such as a Burdizzo (*figure 2, above*) has a crushing, but not cutting mechanism, so a knife must be used to cut off the tail. This method of using a Burdizzo is no longer legal under The Prohibited Procedures on Protected Animals (Exemptions) (Scotland) Regulations 2010.

Welfare code recommendations on tail docking

- Farmers and shepherds should consider carefully whether tail docking within a particular flock is necessary. Tail docking may be carried out only if failure to do so would lead to subsequent welfare problems because of dirty tails and potential fly strike. If it is considered that both tail docking and castration are necessary, thought should be given to performing both operations at the one time of handling, so as to minimise disruption and the potential for mis-mothering and distress.
- Tail docking must be carried out only in strict accordance with the law (see box below). The procedure should be performed by a competent, trained operator.

The law – tail docking

The Prohibited Procedures on Protected Animals (Exemptions) (Scotland) Regulations 2010 (as amended) allow tail docking by shepherds only if crushing tissues using rubber ring or other device or using a hot iron. Surgical docking of lambs (of any age) may only be carried out by a veterinary surgeon. Sufficient tail must be retained to cover the vulva in the case of female sheep and the anus in the case of male sheep.

Organic farming

Castration and tail docking in organic production systems is also covered by European Organic Regulations (EC). Organic producers should check with their Certification Body to ensure required standards are met and they have authorisation for planned procedures. Many organic flocks no longer undertake either castration or tail docking and are successfully managed without welfare, health or quality issues.

Further information

Scottish Government Codes of Practice for the Welfare of Sheep <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0039/00391621.pdf>
Elastrator photograph by C Goodwin - Own work, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=4968019>

Author

Hannah Orr, Veterinary Investigation Officer, SAC Consulting Veterinary Services, Mill of Craibstone
Bucksburn, Aberdeen, AB21 9TB

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