

## NEED TO KNOW



Things you need to know about safe practices for sheep health.

# How to handle & restrain sheep

A thorough understanding of sheep behaviour is necessary for humane, safe and low stress handling.

*Sheep can be difficult to handle if you force them to act in ways that are not natural for them.*

### KNOW ABOUT FLIGHT ZONE AND POINT OF BALANCE

All animals have a **flight zone** – the animal's personal space. It is where the animal feels comfortable and unthreatened. When a person is outside the animal's flight zone, the animal will turn and face the handler.

It is best to work on the outside of an animal's flight zone. If the flight zone is penetrated too deeply, animal behaviour can be unpredictable and dangerous.

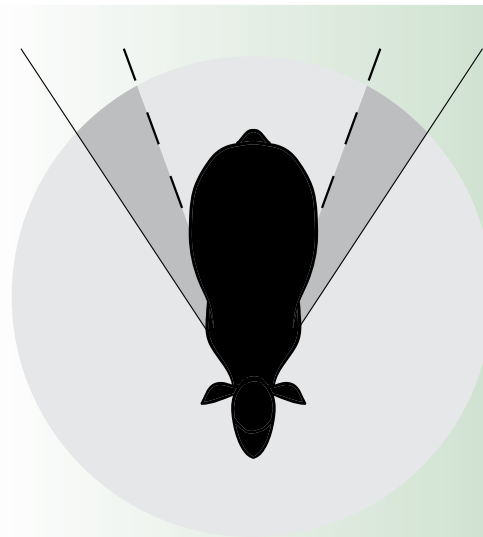
The size of an animal's flight zone varies. It depends how wild or tame the animal is. Sheep confined to a small space will have a smaller flight zone than sheep confined to a large area. Frequent, gentle handling tends to diminish the size of the flight zone. At the same time, sheep have excellent memories and can remember rough handling.

**Point of balance** is another important livestock handling concept. The point of balance is at the animal's shoulder and it is determined by the animal's wide angle vision. All species of livestock will move forward if the handler steps behind the point of balance. They will back up if the handler stands in front of the point of balance.



### DO YOU KNOW

enough about the principle of flight zone and how it relates to safe handling? If you think you need to know more, revisit the information in **Humane Animal Handling Skills** on the *Virtual Apprentice 1040: Animal Basics* website at [www.ctsanimals.ca/va1040/harmQ3.html](http://www.ctsanimals.ca/va1040/harmQ3.html).



What do the shaded zones in this illustration tell you about handling safety?

Many people make the mistake of standing in front of the point of balance while trying to get livestock to move forward through a chute. Sheep will usually refuse to move if they see people up ahead.

Calm sheep are easier to move. If sheep become excited, it takes 20 to 30 minutes for them to calm back down. People should be quiet when moving animals. Yelling and loud noise is very stressful. High pitched noises are especially stressful.

Adapted from Grandin, Temple: *Understanding Flight Zone and Point of Balance for Low Stress Handling of Cattle, Sheep and Pigs*. [www.grandin.com/behaviour/principles/flight.zone.html](http://www.grandin.com/behaviour/principles/flight.zone.html)

*Sheep are flock animals and may feel threatened if they are separated from the flock.*

#### KNOW STRATEGIES FOR SAFE HANDLING

Some important aspects of sheep behaviour as it relates to handling and movement include:

- Sheep do not like to be enclosed in a tight environment, and will move on their own accord into larger areas.
- Sheep move toward other sheep willingly.
- Sheep move away from workers and dogs.
- Sheep have relatively good long-term memory, especially with respect to unpleasant experiences.
- If given a choice, sheep prefer to move over flat areas rather than up an incline, and up an incline rather than moving down it.
- Sheep prefer to move from a darkened area towards a lighter area, but avoid contrasts in light.
- Sheep flow better through facilities if the same paths and flow directions are maintained.
- Stationary sheep are motivated to move by the sight of sheep running away.
- Sheep will balk or stop forward movement when they see sheep moving in the opposite direction.
- Sheep will move faster through a long, narrow pen or area than through a square pen.
- Sheep move better through a **race**, a narrow yard in which they are treated, if they cannot see the operator.
- Sheep will more willingly move toward an open area than toward what they perceive as a dead end.
- Very young lambs that become separated from their dams will want to return to the area where they first became separated.
- Sheep react negatively, as do all livestock, to loud noises, yelling and barking.
- Young sheep move through facilities easier when their first move through is with well trained older sheep.

Excerpted with permission from *Use Sheep Behaviour to Your Advantage*: Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food. [www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/livestock/sheep/facts/02-059.htm](http://www.omafra.gov.on.ca/english/livestock/sheep/facts/02-059.htm)



## KNOW HOW HANDLING FACILITIES HELP YOU HANDLE SHEEP

The following strategies are examples of techniques for handling sheep in three proven types of handling facilities.

If a permanent handling facility like a corral or pen is not available, there should be enough portable gates to make a small holding area that confines the animals. These gates should include small gates for lambing pens and longer gates for a portable handling system. Gates should be in good condition, securely attached to walls and free of protruding objects that may cause injuries.

### Combination sheep and cattle facilities

- In a cattle and sheep handling facility, the animals can be gathered into a holding area.
- The crowd area is in the centre and leads to the chute.
- A vertical gate near the back of the chute drops when an animal goes to the head gate, preventing the others from advancing. This allows the handler to check sheep without having the other animals too close.
- A man gate near the head gate allows access into the chute.



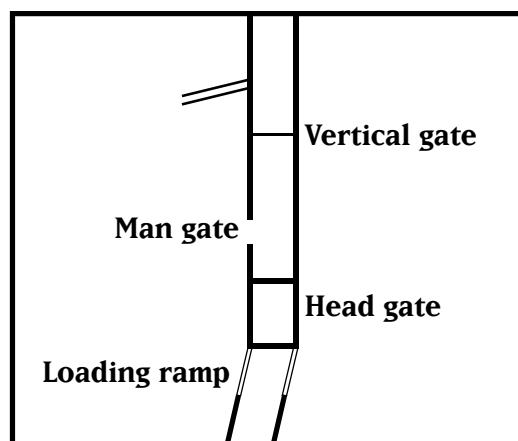
#### DO YOU KNOW

enough about other housing facilities? If you think you need to know more about ways that housing can help ensure safe and humane handling of sheep, go to **Housing & fencing structures for sheep** in the inquiry topic, **Know livestock housing & equipment** at [www.ctsanimals.ca/va2040/environment.html](http://www.ctsanimals.ca/va2040/environment.html).



#### LINK

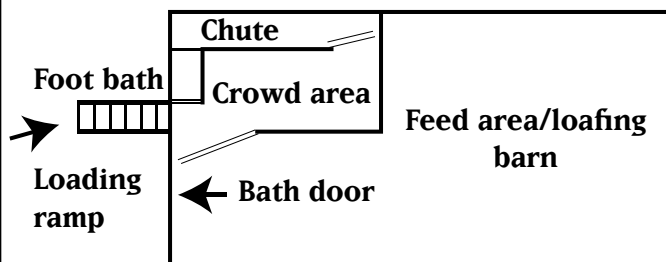
Sheep handling facilities contribute to safe and humane handling. Plans can be accessed on the Canada Plan Service website at [www.cps.gov.on.ca/english/frameindex.htm](http://www.cps.gov.on.ca/english/frameindex.htm). Go to the plans for Sheep and look for the *Sheep Corral Unit* and the *Working Chute*.



- After the animal is finished in the head gate, it can be sent up the loading ramp onto a truck or trailer or may be diverted into another fenced area.
- The head gate may be released when standing outside the chute. The head gate should be removable.
- Should an animal suddenly go down while in the head gate, pins can be quickly knocked out, releasing the head gate. This gives the handler a quick means of releasing the animal from restraint and gives access to it for treatment.

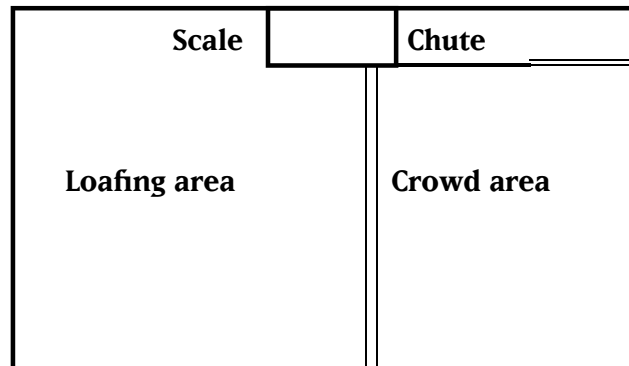
## Gates set up to accommodate several tasks

- Gates can play a vital role in sorting, treating and managing sheep.
- The loading ramp is used when sheep are entering or leaving the premises.
- Using gates that swing and/or slide, sheep can be loaded or unloaded from a trailer or truck. New animals can be put through a foot bath as a preventative health measure. The chute provides a place to treat animals as they progress through the system.
- Swinging the gates, indicated by double lines on the overhead view, allows the handler to move sheep outside into a fenced area after they have been through the handling system.



## Crowd area/chute system with scale

- A crowd area with chute system allows a handler to move sheep through a scale with little difficulty.
- Located at the end of the animals' loafing area, a gate swings to move several animals into the crowd area. The gate can then be closed, directing the animals into the chute.
- The chute leads directly into the scale. Animals at market weight can be identified and made ready for market.
- After the sheep leave the scale, they may return to the loafing area until they are ready to transport.



Sheep Safety: Government of Nova Scotia. [www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/11766353/sheep-safety](http://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/11766353/sheep-safety)

## What does the Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Sheep say about handling, grouping and moving sheep?

Sheep are handled and subjected to different management procedures. These procedures are undertaken for health reasons (e.g., vaccination, dipping, foot bathing) and for production reasons (e.g., shearing and sorting). Many of these handling and management procedures are stressful to sheep.

Understanding the behaviour of sheep facilitates handling, leading to reduced stress and injury and improved handler safety.

Sheep are sensitive to the predictability and familiarity of their environment. Sudden changes can easily startle sheep. The handling environment will affect their responses. Sheep are social animals with very strong flocking and following instincts. These behaviours can be utilized to facilitate handling procedures.

Handling sheep in groups reduces stress to individuals. Good handling facility design should make use of the natural behaviour of sheep. Sheep have a flight zone in which they try to distance themselves from the handler. A safe distance to follow behind the flock is about three body lengths, 3 to 4 metres. Using positive reinforcement during handling (e.g., a food reward), habituating sheep to the handling area, and using familiar handling system layouts can help to reduce the stress of handling procedures and the use of dogs and humans as fear inducing stimuli. Unfamiliar humans, movement, shouting, and proximity to dogs, particularly if barking, can cause fear.



### LINK

A factsheet on sheep behaviour and how it helps to guide humane handling practices is provided in *Understanding Sheep Behaviour* by Saskatchewan Ministry of Agriculture at [www.sksheep.com/documents/Ex\\_Understanding\\_Sheep\\_Behaviour.pdf](http://www.sksheep.com/documents/Ex_Understanding_Sheep_Behaviour.pdf). This factsheet summary is also provided in the Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Sheep. Why do you think an understanding of sheep behaviour is important for effective handling practices?

Reducing the fearfulness of sheep when handled can increase handling efficiency, reduce the incidence of injuries, create a calmer flock and improve performance. Sheep are capable of learning from one experience and can remember good and bad experiences. Previously learned aversion to a stressful handling procedure might diminish over time if it is not repeated. Sheep have a strong ability to recognize individual people. Fostering positive human-sheep interactions (e.g., providing some gentling with humans) is therefore important for animal welfare.

Use the minimal amount of restraint possible when handling sheep (e.g., hand restraint under the jaw). Do not lift, drag or pull sheep by the fleece, tail, legs, ears, neck or horns as this can cause pain and bruising. In an open area, a crook can be used to catch a sheep by the neck or leg. 🐏🐏





The following **requirements** are identified in the Code of Practice.

**All stockpeople must be competent in sheep handling techniques and have an understanding of sheep behaviour, or be under the direct supervision of an experienced stockperson.**

**Stockpeople must work calmly and quietly with sheep at all times; this includes minimizing noise (e.g., from people, herding dogs and equipment) as much as possible.**

**Plan procedures to minimize the frequency, duration and degree of restraint.**

**Sheep must be handled at all times in such a way as to minimize the risk of pain, injury or distress. For example, sheep must not be:**

- **Dragged or lifted by the fleece, tail, legs, ears, neck or horns**
- **Grabbed by the fleece**
- **Held on their side or back for more than a few minutes at a time especially if the rumen is full or if they are heavily pregnant.**

**Electric prods are ineffective and must not be used on sheep.**

**Mistreating animals is unacceptable. This includes, but is not limited to kicking, striking, slamming gates on sheep.**

**Electro-immobilization must not be used.**

These **recommended practices** are also provided in the Code of Practice.

- a. Use a well-designed, easily operated handling system, designed specifically for sheep, that is appropriate in size and scale to suit the flock numbers.
- b. Ensure handling facilities and equipment are in place and in good working order.
- c. Familiarize sheep with the handling facilities to help facilitate willingness of the sheep to enter the handling system.
- d. Consider positive reinforcement (e.g., feed rewards) to encourage positive response for future handling.
- e. Take advantage of the natural behaviour to encourage free movement.
- f. Employ methods on farm (i.e., gentling) to help sheep become accustomed to the presence of people.
- g. Minimize isolation of individual sheep.
- h. Working sheep with dogs can be stressful and should be limited to times where their use is necessary.

A well-trained dog can save a producer a great deal of effort when herding and moving sheep. Herding dogs can represent a threat and induce fear in sheep, especially in sheep unfamiliar with them. If using herding dogs, it is essential that they be well trained.

Most breeds of herding dogs have strong instincts to stalk and chase livestock. If these instincts have not been properly channeled through training, herding dogs will generally do more harm than good by chasing sheep erratically, running through the flock, or becoming overly aggressive towards the sheep. Dogs may become overly excited with sheep in confined areas, particularly if the flock is not moving well. Therefore it is critical that where dogs are used in confined spaces they must be appropriate (i.e., dogs that bark rather than eye dogs). The sheep will remember the frightening experience and may be reluctant to enter the handling system the next time.

If a trained dog is purchased, be sure to take some time to learn commands that the dog already knows; improperly trained people may be just as frustrating for dogs as poorly trained dogs are to shepherds. 🐾

The following **requirements** are identified in the Code of Practice.

**Stockpeople using dogs to move sheep must be trained to handle dogs, or be under the supervision of a trained dog handler.**

**Dogs must be under good command and must not be allowed to force the sheep too fast nor to continue to force the sheep when they have nowhere to go.**

**Dogs must not be allowed to nip or bite the sheep.**

**Dogs must not be allowed to work the sheep without the handler present.**



## KNOW THE PRINCIPLES OF LOW STRESS RESTRAINT

There are many different ways to restrain sheep, including pressing it against a wall or straddling it to limit movement. A halter is one of the easiest ways to restrain sheep for treatment or close inspection.

### Tipping sheep

If the sheep's hooves need to be trimmed or access gained to its underside, the sheep should be set on its rump. Setting a sheep on its rump is called **tipping**.

Sheep in this position struggle very little and are easy to work with. To rest comfortably on its rump, the sheep should be off centre, so that it is sitting on its hip and not its dock. If the sheep struggles, a hand can be placed on its **brisket**, or breast, to move it into a better position.

*The best restraint equipment in the world is useless if it is operated in a careless or rough manner. Equipment can be engineered to enable an inexperienced person to operate it but there is no way engineering can prevent a rough or careless person from stressing or injuring the animals.*

### How to tip a sheep

1. Stand to the side of the sheep.
2. Hold the sheep's head in your left hand by placing your hand under its jaw.
3. Your left knee should be near or just behind the sheep's left shoulder.
4. Your right leg should be touching the sheep's side near its left hip.
5. Place your right hand on the sheep's back over the hips.
6. Turn the sheep's nose away from you towards its shoulder.
7. You should feel the weight of the sheep lean against your legs.
8. Put pressure on the hips with your right hand so the sheep cannot pick its back feet off the floor.
9. Take a step back with your right leg.
10. The hindleg of the sheep should start to go down.
11. Continue to bring the head around until the sheep is sitting down with its back leaning against your legs.

Tipping larger sheep can be more difficult. A large sheep can be tipped by reaching underneath its body and grabbing its farthest legs, until it drops to its rump. Sometimes, this is a two-person job.

Small sheep or lambs can usually be tipped by holding them under their front legs, lifting them, and using a knee to push their rumps out.

Adapted from Sheep 201 website. [www.sheep101.info/201/handling.html](http://www.sheep101.info/201/handling.html)

Excerpts from the *Code of Practice for the Care and Handling of Sheep* (©2013) have been used with permission, Canadian Sheep Federation and the National Farm Animal Care Council. [www.nfacc.ca/pdfs/codes/sheep\\_code\\_of\\_practice.pdf](http://www.nfacc.ca/pdfs/codes/sheep_code_of_practice.pdf)

The process for the development of updated Codes can be accessed through the National Farm Animal Care Council at [www.nfacc.ca/codes-of-practice](http://www.nfacc.ca/codes-of-practice).