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How to tell the age of sheep

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The number, condition, and order of eruption of the permanent incisors of sheep are the main indicators of their age. There is, however, a wide variation in the time of eruption of the permanent incisors caused by variations in breed, strain and environment, and particularly by nutrition.

The teeth of a sheep are divided into two distinct sections, namely, eight permanent incisors in the lower front jaw and twenty-four molars, the latter being divided into six on each side of the upper and lower jaw. Sheep have no teeth in the front part of the upper jaw which consists of a dense, hard, fibrous pad.

When born, the lamb usually has no teeth. Within a week after birth, the milk teeth or temporary teeth appear in the front lower jaw and by the time the lamb is two months old these, eight in all, have erupted.

These temporary teeth are replaced by permanent incisors, which appear in pairs, commencing with the two central teeth, followed by one on either side at intervals, until the eight temporary teeth have been replaced. During the period the teeth are growing, sheep are referred to by the number of permanent incisors present, such as two-tooth, four-tooth, six-tooth, eight-tooth or full mouth.

The accompanying diagram sets out the development of the permanent incisors and the variation in age at which they may erupt.

Only a rough estimate of a sheep's age can be made by looking at its teeth. When estimating the age, it is important to bear in mind whether the breed is early or late maturing.

British breeds, for example, mature at a faster rate than Merinos, and their teeth erupt at an earlier age.

The condition of the teeth will vary according to the type of feed and country grazed on. On long, soft feed the teeth will grow long from lack of wear, but remain in good condition. On short feed, where close grazing is necessary, particularly if the soil is sandy or gravelly, the teeth will wear down.

After the eight permanent incisors have appeared, the next stage is known as 'broken mouth'. This is a progressive deterioration, the rate depending on the conditions under which the sheep was grown. Estimation of age at this stage is very difficult. The teeth gradually become longer with wide spaces,

Age	Teeth
15 months	Only one sheep was rising 2-tooth.
16 months	Two were 2-tooth and a third was rising 2-tooth.
19 months	All sheep showing as 2-tooth, one rising 4-tooth.
22 months	All were 4-tooth or rising 4-tooth.
27 months	Two sheep were rising 6-tooth.
28 months	Two more were rising 6-tooth.
29 months	All sheep (eight at this stage) were rising 6-tooth.
32 months	All sheep were 6-tooth.
34 months	Six sheep were rising full mouth.
36 months	All sheep were rising full mouth.
38 months	All sheep were full mouth.

Guide to estimating the age of sheep by their teeth

	Birth to 12 months	
	Lamb's teeth	8 milk teeth
	12-19 months	
	Two-tooth	2 central incisors 6 milk teeth
	18-24 months	
	Four-tooth	2 central incisors 2 middle incisors 4 milk teeth
	23-36 months	
	Six-tooth	2 central incisors 2 middle incisors 2 lateral incisors 2 milk teeth
	28-48 months	
	Eight-tooth	2 central incisors 2 middle incisors 2 lateral incisors 2 corner incisors

eventually falling out, or they may wear down, become loose and fall out. After the teeth have fallen out the sheep is known as a 'gummy'.

Observations at Trangie

To demonstrate the wide variation which occurs in the eruption of teeth, the result of a study on the growth of teeth in Merino sheep is given below. The study was conducted over three years at Trangie Agricultural Research Station with nine sheep till they were full mouth.

Regarding the milk teeth of the sheep under observation, two were born with two milk teeth, eight had their milk teeth up at five weeks and all nine had their milk teeth up at eight weeks.

The wide variation demonstrated by the observations at Trangie occurred in nine sheep only, and it is possible that a greater range of variation would occur in larger numbers. The results, however, show that the sheep being studied reached the two-tooth stage in a

period covering nineteen months; the four-tooth stage between the age of twenty-one and twenty-two months; and the six-tooth stage between twenty-seven and thirty-two months; and they were full mouthed, or had eight incisors fully up, at thirty-eight months.

No records were kept in connection with the change which took place in the molars, because the molars are never examined when determining age.

DISCLAIMER

The information contained in this publication is based on knowledge and understanding at the time of review (October 2003.) However, because of advances in knowledge, users are reminded of the need to ensure that information upon which they rely is up to date and to check currency of the information with the appropriate officer of New South Wales Department of Agriculture or the user's independent adviser.