BACKGROUND
There are over one billion sheep worldwide, including 480 million in Asia, over 100 million in the EU27 and around 34 million in the UK. Most sheep are farmed outdoors in extensive systems, with less than 1% kept in industrial systems (although this still equates to several million animals). Housing is generally reserved for lambing, fattening of some lambs and for milking sheep.

WELFARE ISSUES
Although sheep are generally reared in more extensive systems than many other farmed animals, there are a number of serious welfare issues in modern sheep production:

Mutilations
Lambs are routinely subjected to a number of mutilations, typically without any pain relief. All of these mutilations cause acute pain and distress and chronic pain which may last for days or even weeks after the procedure.

Castration of male lambs is widely performed to ease management. Castration is usually carried out by one of three methods: application of a tight rubber ring that cuts off the blood supply so that the scrotum shrivels and falls off after a few weeks, crushing the spermatic cords with a clamp or ‘bloodless castrator’, or surgical removal of the testes with a knife. The use of local anaesthetic during castration and pain relief afterwards is effective in reducing pain but is rarely used.

Tail docking is widely performed in an attempt to prevent faeces building up around the tail area, which is thought to increase the risk of ‘flystrike’. This is when flies lay their eggs in the sheep’s wool and, if not noticed and treated, the larvae can eat into the flesh. Docking is usually carried out by the application of a tight rubber ring, cutting with a knife or cauterisation with a hot iron.

Tail docking is often performed out of tradition rather than necessity and research indicates that, at best, it may only be partially effective in preventing flystrike. Injection of local anaesthetic into the tail with multi-shot syringes or needleless injectors can reduce pain associated with all methods of docking and can be rapidly effective but again it is rarely used. Flystrike can be controlled by other methods and some breeds of sheep are much less susceptible to flystrike.

Mulesing is an even more extreme mutilation aimed at prevention of flystrike. It involves the surgical removal of strips of wool-bearing skin from around the tail of a sheep. Mulesing is performed on approximately 80% of Merino wool-producing sheep in Australia.
Mulesing causes a stress response and behavioural changes, indicating that the animal is in pain, that persist for 24 to 48 hours. It can also affect the animal's growth for two weeks. The welfare of mulesed lambs could be improved by use of a combination of local anaesthetic and a long-acting non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug. Increased chemical use and flock inspections could keep flystrike rates to present levels if mulesing were not used. Genetic selection could also be used to reduce the susceptibility of Australian Merino sheep to flystrike. Mulesing is already being phased out in New Zealand and will begin to be phased out in Australia from 2010.

Lameness
Lameness is a major welfare problem in sheep. Surveys of UK sheep farms have found that over 90% report having a problem with lameness. More must be done to reduce the incidence of lameness, especially that due to foot rot which is an infectious disease for which there are well-recognised control methods available. Lame sheep with foot rot are more sensitive to being touched, which indicates pain, and they also have higher levels of plasma cortisol (a stress hormone).

Body condition and nutrition
Many ewes die during winter and spring because of poor body reserves to cope with winter, inadequate grazing and the stresses of lambing. It is important that body condition scoring is carried out regularly so that the quantity/quality of the diet can be adjusted to ensure that ewes remain in good condition. Body condition scoring is particularly important for hill sheep and systems where ultrasound for lamb detection is not available. Poor nutrition during pregnancy can affect the behavioural development of the lambs.

Lambing
Multiple births are common in many modern sheep breeds. Lambs from multiple births tend to be smaller and more vulnerable. Low birth weight and twin- and triplet-bearing ewes are associated with higher lamb mortality. Lamb mortality rates in the UK are around 10-15%. Ewe mortality at lambing in the UK is around 2-4%. Health and welfare standards may be inadequate on some farms during the lambing period and decisions on the use of veterinary treatment may be based on economics rather than the best interests of the animals.
**Housing**

Most sheep remain outdoors throughout their lives. Housing sheep at lambing makes it easier to provide assistance at birth and reduces both predation and climatic stress. However, in lambing pens disturbed ewes may abandon their lambs and stealing may occur by mothers-to-be. Stolen lambs may then be abandoned once the mother has had her own.

Problems with aggression are more likely with housed sheep, particularly when they are highly stocked and when mixed with unfamiliar animals. Stereotypies such as wool-pulling and biting pen-fittings are rare among grazing sheep but are often seen in housed sheep and are associated with reduced feeding time and a lack of space for exercise.

**Stockmanship**

In Europe and some other areas, there has been a trend over the past few decades for flock sizes to increase while the number of shepherds looking after them has fallen. The ratio of sheep to shepherd has therefore increased dramatically. There is concern that reduced supervision in so-called ‘easy-care’ flocks may affect lamb mortality and animal welfare.

Sheep find a number of handling procedures stressful such as when visually isolated from other sheep and when being shepherded with a dog. Recently sheared sheep can suffer cold stress if turned out in cold conditions.

**IMPROVING WELFARE**

The major welfare issues affecting sheep can largely be addressed through good grazing regimes, better genetics and good stockmanship. ‘Easy care’ breeds have fewer problems with lambing and are less susceptible to flystrike and foot rot. However, it is essential that sheep are given adequate supervision to ensure any welfare issues are quickly noticed and addressed. In organic farming, sheep must not be kept permanently indoors and mutilations are discouraged.
RECOMMENDATIONS

You can help to improve the welfare of sheep in a number of ways:

✔ Join Compassion in World Farming’s campaigns or donate to our work at ciwf.org
✔ Download our Compassionate Shopping Guide at ciwf.org.uk/supermarkets
✔ If you buy sheep’s milk, lamb or mutton, look out for organic-certified produce to ensure that the animals have had access to pasture;
✔ If you buy products containing wool, ask the retailer about whether the sheep were mulesed. Ask them not to stock products from mulesed sheep;
✔ You can find out more about the welfare standards of the UK’s major food retailers from our Supermarket Survey Report at ciwf.org.uk/publications/consumers
SOURCES AND FURTHER READING


