Technical Note TN658

SRUC

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Condition Scoring of Sheep

SUMMARY

- Condition scoring is a simple and very effective tool to improve the productivity of a sheep flock and also to minimise animal welfare problems.
- Assessing the condition score of ewes within the flock provides indicators for future ewe management and of deficiencies in past ewe management.
- It allows the adjustment of ewe nutrition to try to maximise productivity and reduce health and welfare problems associated with lean or overfat body condition.
- The technique is particularly useful in the hill situation where the physical conditions of weather and poor grazings impose significantly greater welfare stresses than in the lowland situation.
- By using condition scoring regularly then the skill of identifying lean or overfat animals will be improved.

Why Condition Score?

The main reasons for condition scoring are:

- Minimises animal welfare problems
- Contributes to optimising productivity
- Provides indicators for future ewe management
- Provides indicators of deficiencies in past ewe management

The technique is particularly useful in the hill situation where the physical conditions of weather and poor grazings impose significantly greater welfare stresses than in the lowland situation. Nevertheless lowland ewes benefit from condition scoring in helping to maximise the number of lambs born and successfully reared.

Although most problems relate to thin ewes, overfat ewes provide similar difficulties. Trials have shown that lean ewes and fat ewes will under-perform because:

At mating

- They do not come into heat when the rams are first let out
- They have erratic heat periods and shed fewer eggs
- They are more prone to resorb foetuses

In mid and late pregnancy

- Both fat and thin ewes are more prone to Twin Lamb Disease
- Lean ewes are more likely to die
- Vaginal prolapse is more common in flocks with many fat ewes

At lambing

- Lean ewes may have difficult births due to weakness. Fat ewes may have more difficult births due to oversized lambs.
- Produce fewer and weaker lambs
- Lean ewes have poor colostrum and milk supply resulting in lamb losses
- Lean ewes are poorer mothers

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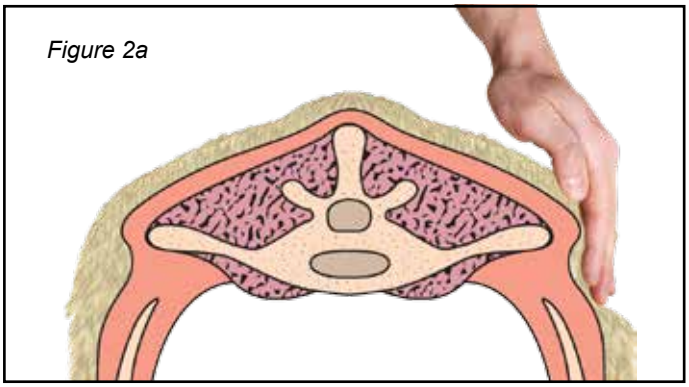
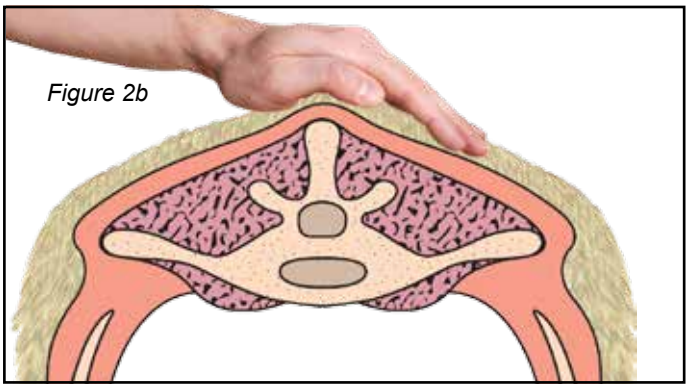
How to Condition Score Ewes

Body condition score is assessed by handling the ewe over and round the back bone in the area of the loin above the last rib (see figure 1).

- Using the finger tips feel the level of fat cover over the spine. The degree of sharpness or roundness of the lumbar vertebrae indicates the amount of fat cover.
- Then feel and assess the prominence and degree of fat cover over the horizontal processes and assess the amount of muscle and fat under the ends of these bones (see figure 2a).
- The final step is to assess the eye muscle and its cover by pressing the fingers into the area between the vertical and horizontal processes (see figure 2b).

Figure 1. Correct area of the back used to assess the body condition score.





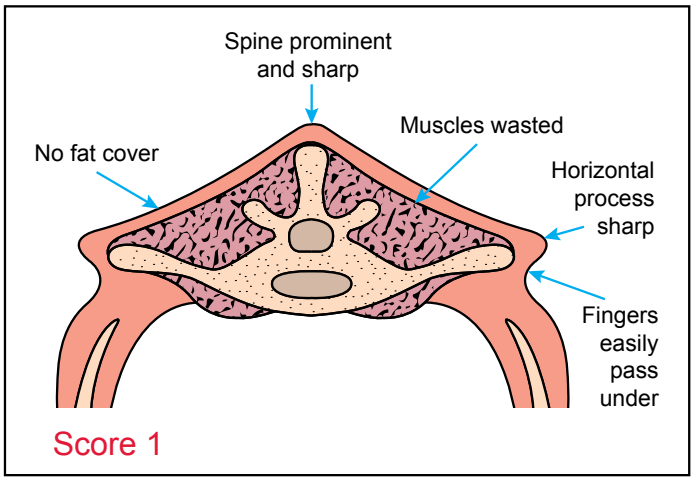
Figures 2a and b showing areas to assess for fat cover and muscle depth.

Taking these assessments into account it is possible to score all ewes on a scale of 1-5 using half scores as intermediaries.

Condition score 0

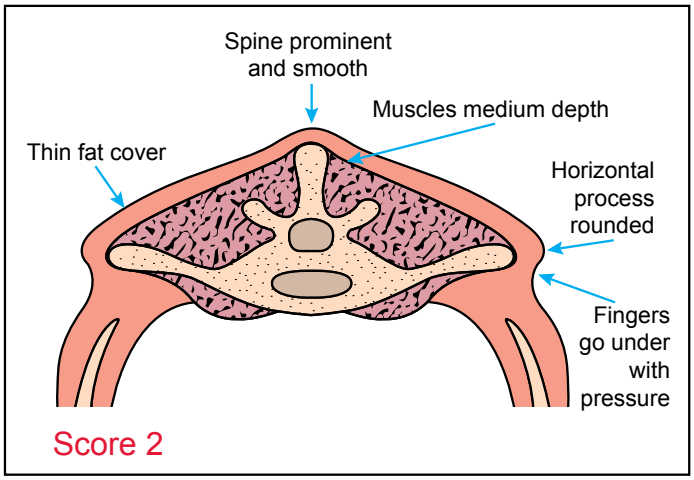
This score is rarely used if ever as the ewe is so emaciated it is on the point of death.

Condition score 1



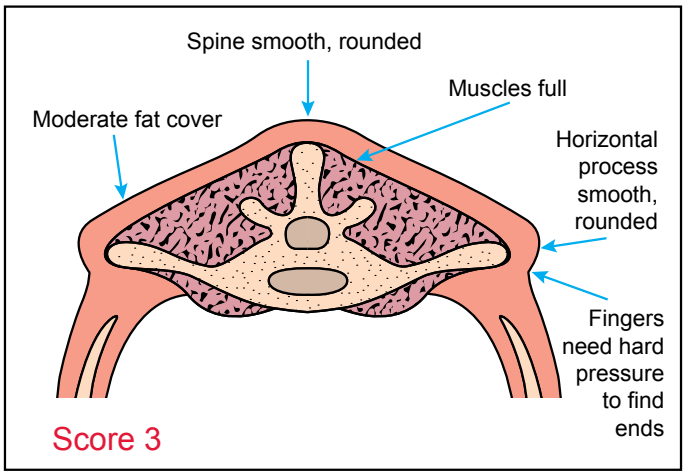
The vertical and horizontal processes are prominent and sharp. The fingers can be pushed easily below the horizontals and each process can be felt. The loin is thin with no fat cover.

Condition score 2



The vertical processes are prominent but smooth, individual processes only being felt as corrugations. The horizontal processes are smooth and rounded but it is still possible to press the fingers under. The loin muscle is of moderate depth but with little fat cover.

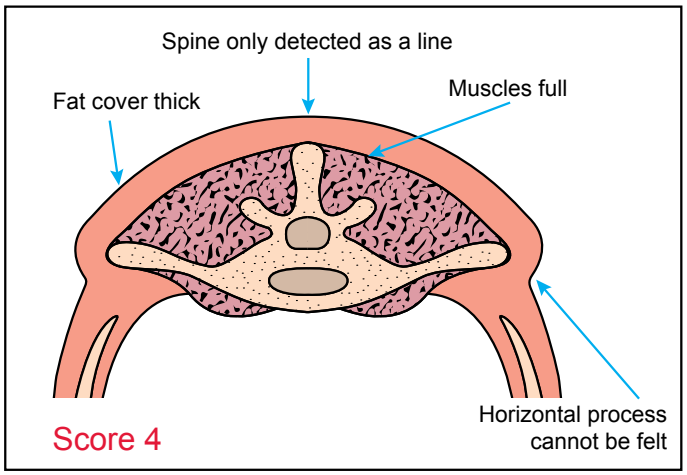
Condition score 3



The vertical processes are smooth and rounded; the bone is only felt with pressure. The horizontal processes are also smooth and well covered; hard pressure is required with the fingers to find the ends. The loin muscle is full with a moderate fat cover. Most ewes are in between scores and 2 and 3 so it is necessary to refine the scoring to half scores.

A prime lamb has a score of 3.

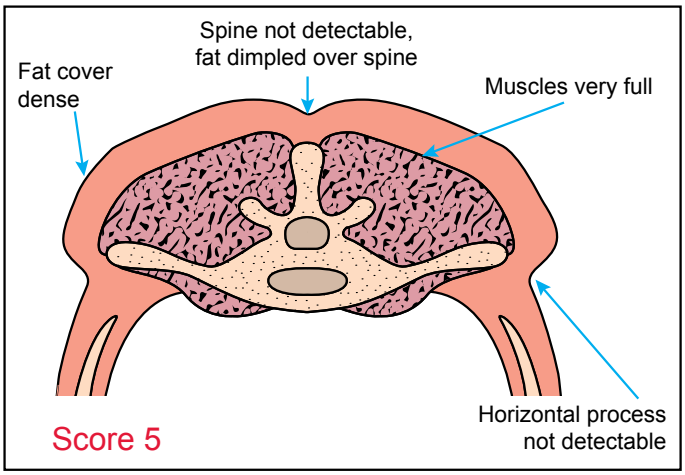
Condition score 4



The vertical processes are only detectable as a line. The ends of the horizontal processes cannot be felt. The loin muscles are full and have a thick covering of fat.

Tups prior to tupping should have a score of 4.

Condition score 5



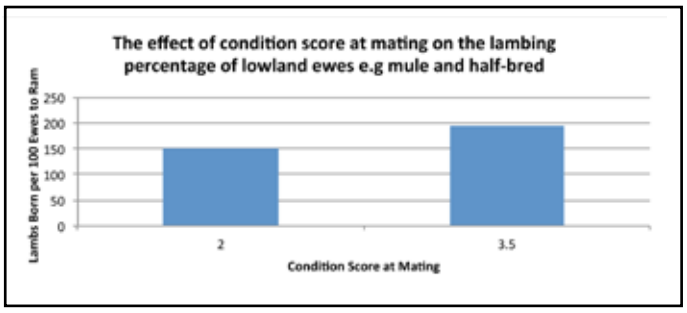
Neither the vertical nor the horizontal processes can be felt even with pressure. It would be most unusual to have a ewe with a score of 5 in a commercial flock.

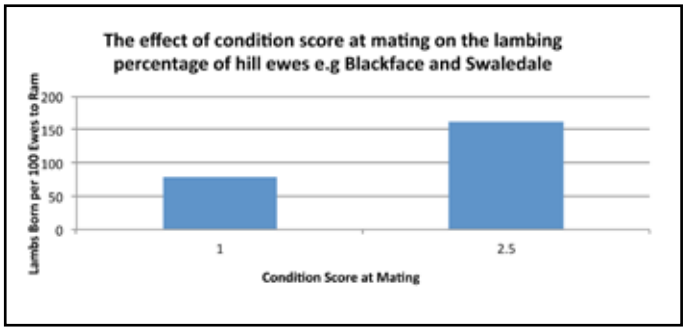
When should condition scoring be used?

At weaning

Condition scoring at weaning or at the very latest eight weeks before tupping is vital. By assessing scores at this time there is the opportunity to adjust the management of the individual ewes if scores are too low. The following table shows the impact of ewe condition at mating on the number of lambs produced.

Ewes that have successfully reared twins or gimmers having reared a lamb should receive special attention are they are likely to require preferential treatment. Hill ewes are especially vulnerable as they may not survive the winter, far less rear a lamb, if they are returned to the hill in too poor condition.





At tupping

It is most important to condition score at tupping. This provides an indicator of the level of post weaning management and nutrition. It also serves as an early warning for the coming winter if ewes are too lean.

Mid pregnancy

Scoring at this time identifies problem ewes. It is necessary to identify individual ewes rather than a whole flock average. Ewes below the target score will require preferential treatment which will generally be supplementary feeding. Gimmers and older ewes with twins should be scored carefully as they are likely to be the most vulnerable age groups.

Late pregnancy

The foetus starts to grow rapidly in the last 8 weeks of pregnancy. There will be potential problems with lean ewes at this stage. These ewes have to be drawn out and fed. With lean hill ewes at this time survival of the ewe is the prime issue.

Target ewe condition scores

Management systems vary considerably across the country. Different types of ewes; different hills; different lambing systems etc. make it impossible to be precise about target scores. The following table gives some guidance.

Ewe target condition scores

	Hill Ewes	Upland Ewes	Lowland Ewes
At weaning	2	2	2½
At tupping	2½	3	3½
Mid pregnancy	2	2½	3
Late pregnancy	2	2½	3

It is important to use the above targets for identifying individual ewes and not to consider a flock average.

Important points

- Hill ewes should not be returned to the hill with a score less than 2. Poor hill grazings mean that condition will not improve. Ewes which are lean may not survive the winter and will die.

- Scoring at tupping provides an indication of the potential problems at lambing. A high proportion of lean ewes at this stage provides a guide to the amount of supplementary feeding that will be required. Ewes in good condition at tupping will not require as much feed and suggests fewer lambing problems. The previous lambing also gives an indication of the level of condition at weaning. A good lambing with a high proportion of twins means that ewes will be in poorer condition. Care must be taken when there is a poor lambing due to a high eild rate. These eild ewes will be in better than average condition so it is important not to assess condition on a whole flock basis.

- Upland and Lowland ewes with a score of 2 at mid pregnancy must receive preferential treatment which may be inbye grazing and/or supplementary feeding. Often lean ewes at this stage are older ewes carrying twins or gimmers with their first lamb. If no action is taken then lambing problems with weak and sickly lambs, ewes with no milk and pregnancy toxaemia all contribute to unacceptable stress on the ewe.

- Some consideration has to be given to hill ewes in very good condition e.g. score 3. These ewes are more likely to carry twins which may not be desirable in the hill situation. Shepherds have to decide what action to take in this event i.e. whether to accept twins or reduce condition by exposure to poorer grazings prior to tupping (i.e. do not flush)

- It will take approximately eight weeks to modify one unit of condition score. For this reason the post weaning assessment is so important. At this time condition can be improved cheaply with better grazing. Wean hill ewes in good time as grass quality deteriorates quickly in the autumn.

- Land Manager Options provided the opportunity to access an animal welfare option under the Animal Welfare Management Programme. The scheme has closed to new applicants but for those who previously applied, financial support is still available for implementing practices for improving animal welfare. Condition scoring is one of these.

- It has to be remembered that good husbandry is a requirement of the Single Farm Payment and Less Favoured Area support scheme regulations. If animal welfare issues are identified then there could be financial implications.

Condition Scoring of Rams

It is important that rams are in fit condition for working and a condition score 3.5-4 is recommended. Over-fat rams can be lazy with reduced libido, while fat in the scrotal neck can increase the temperature of the testes reducing semen quality. They can also be too heavy for some ewes. Those that are thin may stop working during the mating period.
Condition score should be assessed 8 to 12 weeks prior to use to allow time for manipulation of diet to achieve target body condition at mating time.

Conclusion

Condition scoring is a simple and very effective tool to improve the productivity of a ewe flock and also to minimise animal welfare problems. By using condition scoring regularly then the skill of identifying lean animals will be improved. This will ensure compliance with the Welfare Codes relating to sheep.

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