

HOW SHEEP AND GOATS ARE DIFFERENT



Ovis aries

Sheep and goats are from the same family (Bovidae: Caprinae) and while they have many similarities, they also have many differences. Despite this, they are often confused and interchanged in the media. Even the Chinese New Year doesn't differentiate between sheep and goats.



Capra hircus

Most sheep don't have horns, but when they do, they are thick and curl alongside their head. Goats usually have horns. Their horns are narrower and point upwards and slightly back. Goats sometimes have beards. Sheep do not. Some rams have manes. Sheep have a split upper lip. Goats do not. One of the easiest ways to tell the difference between a sheep and goat is to look at their tails. Goat tails go up. Sheep tails hang down. Plus, sheep tails are often shortened (docked).

A big difference between sheep and goats is their feeding behavior. Goats are browsers. They prefer to eat leaves, twigs, and shrubs and often stand up on their hind legs to reach the tops of plants. Sheep are grazers and prefer to eat short grasses growing from the ground.



Sheep and goats behave differently. While goats are curious, independent animals, sheep are distant and aloof and have a stronger flocking instinct. Goats are more likely to get into mischief. They are harder to keep in fences.

While sheep and goats are pregnant for the same amount of time, there are some reproductive differences. Goats have a longer estrus cycle. They are easier to artificially breed. The cervix of the sheep is very complicated, making it difficult to pass an insemination rod. Male goats have a strong odor during the rutting season. Ram odor is much milder. If sheep and goats were to mate, the offspring would not likely be viable, as sheep and goats have a different number of chromosomes (54 vs. 60). Sheep-goat hybrids are rare.

