HORNS

Love them or hate them

Horns are a keratinous sheath (like fingernails) that grows over a bony core, which is an extension of the skull. While hollow, they are filled with blood vessels, so they will bleed if cut, broken, or injured. Most goats have horns. Some sheep have horns. Horns are important for defense and social interactions. For hunters, ram horns are trophies. In commercial sheep and dairy goat farming, polledness (hornless) is often favored to make handling safer and easier. Meat and fiber goats are more likely to be horned.

Most sheep are naturally polled, while some breeds have horns in both sexes or just in males. Horn shape and size vary. Sheep horns tend to be thicker than goats' and typically curl and spiral along the sides of their head. Some breeds (e.g., Jacob, Navajo Churro) can have multiple horns, up to 4 or 6. The horn growth of ewes and wethers is usually less pronounced than that of intact males.

Most goats are born with horns, though some are polled. Both sexes usually have horns. Females usually have smaller horns than males. Same with wethers. Compared to sheep horns, goat horns are narrower and tend to be straighter, pointing upwards and backwards.

Some goats have their horns removed via **disbudding** (removal of horn buds in very young goats) or dehorning (older goats, not recommended). It is not common to do anything with sheep horns unless they are growing into their head.

Scurs are smaller less developed horns, not firmly attached to the skull. They can appear in various sizes and forms. They are genetically determined, but their expression varies between sexes. In males, the allele is dominant. In females, it is recessive. The genes responsible for scurs are different from those controlling the presence or absence of horns; however, they can interact. In goats, the primary cause of scurs is incomplete disbudding. Scurs can be problematic as they are easily detached during fights, with the result being a bloodied. head.

Sheep horn genetics are **complex** and involve multiple genes. They vary by breed. Environmental factors can also play a role in horn growth. In goats, horns are **less complicated**. They are determined by a single gene with two allelles. The polled allele is dominant, so goats need two copies of the recessive gene to be horned. Breeding two naturally polled goats together can result in a higher chance of producing intersex offspring, particularly in doelings.

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