

# Ready to become parents

Puberty is the beginning of sexual maturity and the ability to reproduce. Many factors influence the age of puberty in sheep and goats, including breed, genetics, nutrition, season of birth, and presence of a male.

In males, puberty is marked by the development of secondary sex characteristics, including increased size and muscle mass, growth of the testicles, and the production of viable sperm. Most rams/bucks reach puberty between 4 to 6 months of age at approximately 50 to 60 percent of their mature weight. While they can successfully mate at 5 months of age, they will likely be more aggressive at 7 months. Due to their early sexual maturity, it is usually recommended that (intact) male and female offspring (of many breeds) be separated by the time they are four months old.

Ewe/does reach puberty when they have their first estrus (heat cycle), with ovulation (egg release). Compared to males, they tend to show less behavior and physical changes at puberty, but signs may include a swollen or reddened vulva, tail wagging and flagging, restlessness, and increased vocalization. Most ewes/does reach puberty between 5 and 12 months of age. However, they should not be bred until they achieve approximately 60 to 70 percent of their mature weight. After breeding, they should be fed and managed separately from mature females, (ideally) until their second breeding.

Proper nutrition is essential for reaching puberty. While a higher plane of nutrition advances the onset of puberty, a low plane will delay it. At the same time, overfeeding increases fat deposition and can have detrimental effects in both male and female reproduction.

Season of birth can impact the age of puberty, with ewes/does born in the spring often reaching puberty earlier than those born in the fall (due to the impact of photoperiod). The ram or buck effect can be used to hasten puberty in ewes/does.



Some breeds mature faster than others. Sheep breeds that reach puberty at earlier ages include prolific breeds (e.g., Finnsheep and Romanov), British meat breeds, and hair sheep. Late maturing breeds include Rambouillet and other western whiteface breeds. Pygmy, Nigerian Dwarf, and other small goat breeds usually reach puberty earlier than bigger breeds. Females that reach puberty earlier often have higher fertility and reproductive rates.



Male odor intensifies during puberty.

