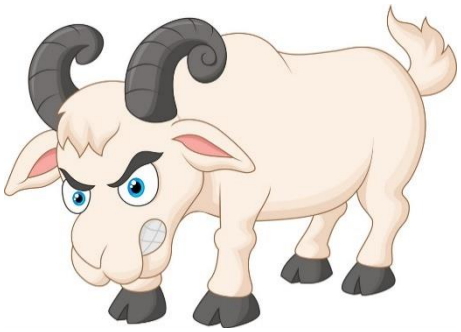
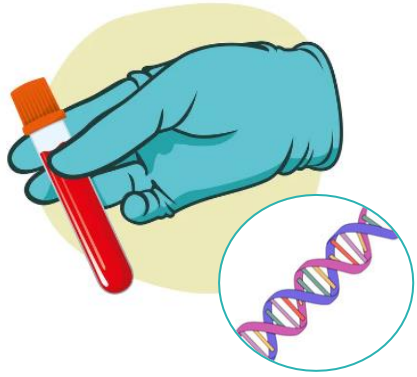
SCRAPIE

Almost eradicated!

Scrapie is a transmissible spongiform encephalopathy (TSE) affecting sheep and goats. The presence of “classical” scrapie in the US sheep and goat population affects the industry economically through production losses, lost exports, and increased production and disposal costs. While the incidence of scrapie in the US is very low (less than 0.0 percent) and no new cases have been reported since 2021, the goal to have the US declared “scrapie-free” has not yet been met.

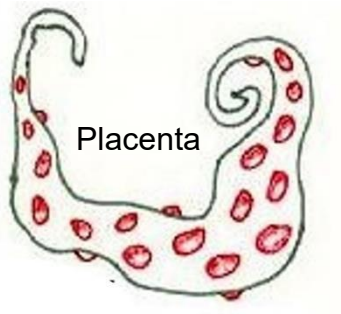


Scrapie is not a genetic disease, but an animal’s genetics (DNA) determine if it would get scrapie if it were exposed to the infective agent, believed to be a prion (a misshapen protein).



Scrapie is a reportable disease. Early signs include subtle changes in behavior or temperament. These changes may be followed by scratching and rubbing against fixed objects, apparently to relieve itching. Other signs are loss of coordination, weight loss despite retention of appetite, biting of feet and limbs, lip smacking, and gait abnormalities, including high-stepping of the forelegs, hopping like a rabbit, and swaying of the back end. Signs or effects of the disease usually appear 2 to 5 years after the animal is infected but may take longer to appear. Animals usually live 1 to 6 months after the onset of clinical signs and in some cases longer, but **DEATH IS INEVITABLE.** There is no vaccine, treatment, or cure.

The National Scrapie Eradication Program has many components, including mandatory identification of most sheep/goats when they leave their farm of origin. Producers are also requested to submit heads for testing to assist in identifying those “last” cases of scrapie.



The scrapie agent is thought to be spread primarily from dam to offspring and to other animals in the same birthing group through contact with the placenta and birth fluids and through milk and colostrum. There is no known human health risk with scrapie.

By Susan Schoenian, Sheep & Goat Specialist Emeritus, University of Maryland Extension. For more information, to go https://www.aphis.usda.gov/.