

Is it necessary to dock lambs' tails?

Not always. Lambs' tails are docked (shortened) to prevent fecal matter from accumulating on their tails and backsides, which could attract flies and result in flystrike (deadly maggots). It also keeps them cleaner and makes them easier to shear. The show ring usually requires it. It is recommended for most woolled breeds. However, sheep have tails for a reason, docking is a painful procedure, and not all sheep require docking.



Hair

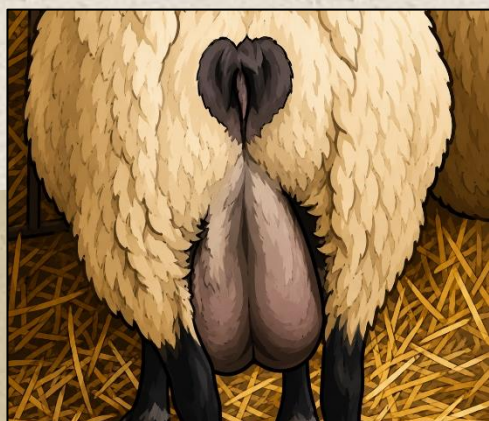


Rat-tailed



Fat-tailed

There are some breeds that generally do not require docking. These include hair sheep (e.g., Katahdin, St. Croix, and Blackbelly) and sheep with rat (or fluke) tails (e.g., Finnsheep, Romanov, East Friesian, and Icelandic), or fat tails (e.g., Awassi and Karakul). In some situations, it may not be necessary to dock the tails of conventional woolled lambs.



Some sheep (tail or not) may require crutching or “dagging” (shearing around the tail and breech) to prevent flystrike. Good hygiene and effective fly control are other important control measures for preventing flystrike.



Providing dry forages (such as hay) to sheep grazing lush pastures can slow down grass digestion and help solidify the feces. Limiting grain consumption may also help keep feces more solid.



Controlling internal parasites will help to prevent loose feces, since several of the parasites that commonly affect sheep cause scours (diarrhea).

If you decide to dock your lambs, do it right. Do it when lambs are young (ideally < 1 week). Use appropriate tools and techniques. Don't dock tails too short (or long). Provide pain mitigation, if possible.



Sheep with short tails that don't require docking would be advantageous. Tail length is one of the most heritable traits in sheep. Researchers tried to create sheep with no tails, but it led to problems. Crossbreeding with short tailed sheep has proven to be a better option.