



ENHANCED ABATTOIR SURVEILLANCE PROGRAM

Cancer

Skin cancers (squamous cell carcinomas) are the most common cancers seen in sheep and are most common in older animals. Sheep with visible cancers are not fit to load and must not be transported for slaughter, and instead be culled on farm.

Condition summary



Cancer in a ewe which has spread to the liver



Cancerous growths (malignant tumours or neoplasms) are caused by a growth of abnormal cells. They may or may not be externally visible. They are an animal welfare issue if they are left untreated or if suffering is not prevented by culling.



On farm, cancer may cause reduced growth rate or weight loss if the cancer is on the skin surface and becomes infected, or if it spreads. Death may occur from flystrike as cancers may become ulcerated and weep and attract flies.



If the cancer is localised and has not spread, the area affected is trimmed resulting in a reduced carcass/dressed weight. The carcass is condemned if the cancer has spread to other parts of the body/organs (known as metastasis).



Surgical removal of cancers is usually reserved for valuable stud animals. Prevention involves protecting sheep from ultraviolet light by providing shade and by modifying mulesing, tailing and shearing practices.

What might be seen on farm?

Skin cancers begin as red, sun-damaged areas of unpigmented skin on the face and ears, or near the vulva. The irritated skin becomes thickened and eventually spreads to invade surrounding tissues. This may cause severe irritation and distress to the animal, particularly if it ulcerates, bleeds, becomes infected and attracts flies. As a result, the cancer may subsequently interfere with grazing and normal behaviour, leading to loss of condition and death.

What causes cancer in sheep?

The most common cancer in sheep is skin cancer, and it is caused by excess exposure to ultraviolet light from the sun. The cancers usually grow slowly over months and eventually spread to deeper tissues or other organs.

There are also other less commonly seen types of cancers and those that may be found internally (and therefore are only detected at the processor).

How do I prevent cancer in sheep?

Some handy tips include:

- leave tails long enough to cover the vulva when tail docking
- leave wool on the top of the tail when mulesing
- consider time of year of shearing
- ensure paddocks contain adequate shade trees, especially in summer
- lower the culling age to reduce the prevalence of cancers

Further information regarding what animals are considered “Fit to Load” may be found on the MLA website, at mla.com.au/isitfittoload. A free guide can be downloaded or a free printed copy can be ordered.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

Contact your local veterinarian, livestock consultant or PIRSA Animal Health Officer
Or visit www.pir.sa.gov.au/eas

