

THE THREE-MINUTE PHYSICAL FOR SHEEP

Dr. Mary Smith
Professor of Veterinary Medicine
Cornell University

Veterinarians have difficulty diagnosing conditions they have not thought of at the time of the physical exam. Just as with other species, following a routine will help to avoid serious oversights.

Approach with a container for urine collection out and available, as small ruminants often urinate when they sense approaching danger and the possible need to run for safety. Check for color (copper poisoning) and ketones (pregnancy toxemia). Sheep can be made to urinate by holding off the nostrils for 30 to 45 seconds (if the bladder isn't empty!).

Although a temperature is routinely taken, remember that chasing the animal or transporting it to your clinic in a compact car will likely elevate the temperature above the 104°F that is considered high normal for small ruminants. Palpate the loin area for body condition score, judged on a 1 = emaciated to 5 = obese scale. If possible compare with others on the same diet to judge if poor body condition represents an individual or herd problem. Check the incisors to estimate age and palpate the molars through the cheeks for gross irregularities. Inspect the conjunctiva of the lower lid for evidence of anemia (haemonchosis, severe coccidiosis) and the sclera for icterus (copper toxicity).

Determine if the animal is visual (polioencephalomalacia) and if it can blink (otitis media, listeriosis). Check the lips for soremouth and the external lymph nodes for caseous lymphadenitis or lymphosarcoma.

Inspect the eyes for pinkeye and entropion. Listen to the lungs, especially on the right side, but remember that small ruminant lungs normally sound harsh. Slight nasal discharge is normal, as is a cough or two if you are strangling the animal. Succuss the left side of the abdomen (grain overload) and try to ballotte a fetus on the right if the patient is female. If male, examine the urethral process for calculi.

Check the feet for footrot by inserting a finger between the toes from behind, looking for underrunning of the sole and interdigital dermatitis. Footrot smells bad. Palpate the scrotum or udder for abnormalities. Take a fecal sample for possible parasite exam. Feces adherent to the wool (dags) is evidence of previous scours.