



## What Sheep Eat

### Sheep Nutrition

The right type and the right amount of food provided at each stage of life is important for raising healthy sheep.

Sheep need different nutrients depending on their stage of life or living conditions. Young sheep that are growing quickly, mother sheep that are pregnant or lactating (making milk), sheep that produce a lot of wool, sheep that live outside in colder climates all need extra nutrients in order to be healthy.

Sheep Nutrition consists of five basic components: water, energy, protein, minerals, and vitamins

**Water:** Water helps sheep digest their food to get the nutrients they need. Clean, fresh water should always be available.

**Energy:** Energy is the fuel that comes from food. Energy is important for sheep (and people!) to stay alive-breathing, circulation, thinking, healing, and growing all take energy from food. If sheep don't get enough energy from their food they may not grow properly, they may get sick more easily, they won't be able to produce healthy babies or enough milk to feed their babies, or their wool may not grow as well. For sheep, food energy mostly comes from pasture, hay, and grains.

**Protein:** Protein is needed to build and repair tissue such as muscle and bone. It is very important for sheep, especially young sheep, to get enough protein. If young sheep are not fed enough high quality protein, they aren't able to grow properly. Sheep usually get their protein from good quality forage and pasture. Sometimes a protein supplement is fed to sheep to make sure they are getting enough.

**Minerals:** In comparison to energy and protein, minerals are needed in much smaller amounts. Just like humans, sheep need many different types of minerals for their bodies to work properly. Sheep mainly get the minerals they need from the food they eat and, in some places, from the water they drink.

**Vitamins:** Sheep need vitamins so they can grow, live healthfully, and reproduce. If sheep are being fed good quality feed, they will get all the vitamins they need. Vitamins A, D and E are "essential" for sheep, which means they need them to live but their bodies can't make them, so they must get them from their feed. Just like people, sheep can make some Vitamin D from the sun's energy. If sheep are not able to get all the vitamins they need from feed, a supplement can be given.

## **Feed Stuffs for Sheep**

### **Water**

Water is the most important part of a sheep's diet, even more important than food! If sheep are not getting enough water, they are not able to grow or produce wool well. Sheep bodies are mostly made of water- 60-70% of their weight comes from water. Sheep can take in eight to twelve litres of water everyday- that is enough to fill a small aquarium!

### **Salt**

Farmers make salt available for their sheep because it encourages them to eat and is important for their bodies to work properly. Sheep love salt so farmers sometimes mix other minerals with it to hide the smells or tastes that they may not enjoy as much.

### **Minerals**

Minerals are usually divided into macro-minerals and micro or trace minerals. Macro means big, and Macro-minerals are needed in bigger amounts (100mg or more per day). They include calcium, phosphorus, sodium, potassium, chloride, sulfur, and magnesium. Micro means small and Micro minerals are needed in smaller amounts (less than 100mg per day). These include manganese, iron, copper, cobalt, zinc, iodine, selenium, and molybdenum.

### **Feed Grains**

Grain does not need to be processed or broken down for sheep; it can be fed whole. Grains do not need to be fed all the time. Normally grain is fed to pregnant moms four weeks before lambing, when the lambs are born; during lactation when sheep are making milk for their lambs; pre-breeding, or before becoming pregnant; and in the feedlot ration, when they are preparing for harvest.

### **Feed Pellet**

Feed pellets are made from finely ground feed that is mixed with water and squeezed into shape. The 'recipe' for feed pellets is carefully designed so that all the sheep's nutritional needs are met. Farmers can be confident that their sheep will have all the nutrients they need to be healthy from the pellets.

### **Feed Mash**

Feed mash is a grain-based feed made by grinding and mixing the right amounts of grains, and supplements to meet the nutritional needs of the sheep.

### **Grass forages**

Sheep prefer fine, leafy hay and will not eat coarse, tough hay. Immature grass hay or leafy alfalfa is usually the best feed for sheep. Grown sheep can get by on good-quality grass hay, but younger lambs do better with a legume crop harvested before it has matured so that it has finer stems and is higher in protein.

### **Alfalfa**

Alfalfa hay is an excellent feed for sheep and is high in protein. It is best used during late gestation, close to when the lambs are ready to be born; and during lactation when mother sheep are making milk for their lambs. Alfalfa is a perennial forage legume, which means it grows again year after year. It is usually harvested and fed as a dry hay. It can be grazed, when sheep can eat it fresh right from the ground; and fed as silage, when it is fermented for easier digestion. Legume crops are normally higher in protein than grass hay.