



Assessing sheep and cattle for lameness for transport or sale at a saleyards

Current as of March 2023.

This factsheet assists a person responsible for livestock in meeting their animal welfare obligations when assessing whether sheep and cattle are lame and evaluating whether they are fit for transport or sale at a saleyard.

What is lameness?

Lameness is any condition that reduces the ability of an animal to bear weight evenly on all legs and hooves, and to walk or move freely. In cattle and sheep, common causes of lameness include traumatic injury, hoof overgrowth, hoof or other leg joint infection (including various forms of footrot), arthritis, fractures and laminitis secondary to high grain diets/acidosis.

Assessing lameness in animals for fitness for transport

Lameness can be assessed at a distance and by close up examination. Sheep and cattle are both prey animals and when stressed may show milder signs of lameness which makes accurate assessment at a distance an important tool.

Distant examination

Distant examination is usually performed in a paddock (at mustering). Moving animals from a large holding yard for drafting may help the person responsible to identify lame animals. Lame animals will generally not keep up with the mob when moved.

Moderate or severe lameness is usually easily detectable through a visual examination of an animal during a distant examination. These animals may:

- be unable to stand on their feet at all (recumbent/downers)
- kneel on its front knees due to pain in the fetlocks or hooves
- be reluctant to move due to pain
- weight bear unevenly on all legs often holding up one leg
- have an arched back when standing and/or walking trying to minimise pain on the sorest leg/hoof
- walk with a noticeable limp or head bobbing action
- walk unevenly or lift and place hoof correctly (including knuckling).

Mild lameness can be harder to detect. Animals showing milder signs of lameness should be separated and observed at rest and while moving. Animals with mild lameness need to be assessed carefully to determine if their condition is likely to result in an increase in pain or distress during transport.

Close examination

Close examination is usually done in mobs of only a few animals where each animal and their legs can be clearly seen. Moving animals in a small pen where the surface is smooth but not slippery and rock free is ideal. Then if needed, for closer assessment of individual animals, they should be restrained appropriately (in cattle crush or sheep caught and tipped) to examine feet, joints and legs to identified cause(s) of lameness.

The cause of lameness usually requires a veterinary examination to provide a diagnosis. Take short videos of the animal limping and photos of any lesion to send to your veterinarian for their opinion. Videos and photos should also be kept for your records.

Which foot is lame?

To identify which foot is lame, watch the pattern of the animal's movement to identify any abnormalities and when the head bobs or moves excessively. See Table 1 for more information.

Table 1 – Identify lame foot	
Lameness is in front foot	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Affected foot is indicated by a corresponding 'head up' movement as animal steps onto lame foot.
Lameness is in hind foot	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Affected foot is indicated by corresponding 'head down' and rump/pelvis up movement as animal steps onto lame foot.Animal may also exhibit a smaller stride.

To isolate the location of the lameness and potential cause, a veterinary examination may be needed.

Images 1, 2, 3 and 4 illustrate some common conditions and signs of lameness.
(Photo source: *Animals' Angels – Australia*)



Image 1 (top left) – overgrown hoof and healing foot abscess in a sheep.

Image 2 (top right) – overgrown hooves in a sheep (sheep also has an undiagnosed abdominal mass, possibly an abdominal hernia).

Image 3 (bottom left) – foot laceration in a cow.

Image 4 (bottom right) – sheep kneeling due to front fetlock or foot pain.

Lameness score systems

There are several score systems used to assess lameness in animals. In Australia, it is common to use a Lameness Score system of 0 to 3. This system can be used for sheep or cattle and is explained in detail in Table 2 on page 5.

Can lame sheep or cattle be transported or offered for sale at saleyard?

Under the Animal Welfare (Transport Saleyards and Depots) (Cattle and Sheep) Regulations 2020 (Transport Regulations) you must not supply for transport, load on a transport vehicle, or offer for sale at saleyard sheep or cattle that have any of the following conditions:

- cannot walk normally by bearing weight on all hooves
- is suffering from a condition, injury or disease that is likely to cause increased pain or distress to the animal during transport.

Livestock must be fit for the journey

Under the Transport Regulations, it is an offence for all persons involved in the process to consign or load sheep or cattle for transport, that are unfit to undertake the journey, whether from the property of origin, saleyard or other place.

Sheep and cattle that have been assessed as not fit for transport cannot be sold at a saleyard. If an animal is considered borderline for its fitness to undertake the journey, consider whether the animal's condition will deteriorate during the journey and/or at the saleyard rendering them unfit for sale or further transportation. Animals will be assessed at a saleyard before sale and again before consigning and loading on the transport vehicle for the outward journey.

Exemption

An animal that is unfit to undertake a journey may be loaded and transported only under the following conditions:

- the consignor and transporter have advice from a veterinarian that the animal can undertake the intended journey
- the transporter ensures that the animal is loaded and transported in accordance with the veterinarian's advice
- the transporter ensures the animal is transported the shortest distance necessary either to another property or abattoir.

A copy of the veterinary advice should accompany the animal to the final destination.

It is strongly recommended the veterinary advice is provided in writing. It is up to the consignor and/or the transporter to prove the veterinarian advised the animal could undertake the journey and was loaded and transported in accordance with the advice of the veterinarian.

Animals transported under veterinary advice must not be sent to a saleyard as they cannot be offered for sale or sold.

Appropriate arrangements for livestock that are not fit for transport or sale

The consignor or person responsible for the livestock animal must ensure that appropriate arrangements are made at first reasonable opportunity if it is not fit to be transported or sold at a saleyard.

Appropriate arrangements mean one or more of the following, depending on the condition of the animal:

- separating the animal from any other animal and resting it until it has recovered
- treating the animal as appropriate to its condition, including seeking veterinary advice
- destroying the animal using a method of humane destruction.

At the first reasonable opportunity

At the first reasonable opportunity means appropriate arrangements for the animal are undertaken without delay except where a reasonable delay is caused by a significant reason relating to resources, skills, safety, or the immediate welfare of other livestock.

More information

- Animal Welfare (Transport, Saleyards and Depots) (Cattle and Sheep) Regulations 2020
- Australian Animal Welfare Standards and Guidelines: Land Transport of Livestock; Livestock at Saleyards and Depots
- Animal Welfare Factsheets:
 - Are your livestock fit to load?
 - Are sheep and cattle fit to be sold at a saleyard?
 - Humane destruction of sheep and cattle
 - Animal Welfare Responsibilities – Consignors and Transporters
 - Animal Welfare Responsibilities – Saleyards
- [agric.wa.gov.au/animalwelfare](https://www.agric.wa.gov.au/animalwelfare)



For more information and to view the suite of animal welfare factsheets, scan the QR code, or visit: <https://www.agric.wa.gov.au/animalwelfare/resources-and-publications>.

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Table 2 – Table explaining the four-point lameness scoring system

Lameness score	Summary & clinical signs – all signs may not be present in all stages of lameness depending on where lameness is located, however they usually become more pronounced with increased lameness	Lameness	Fit to be transported or fit to be sold at saleyard
0	<p>Normal, walks easily with no apparent lameness or change in gait.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Smooth even steps with no change in gait or in back shape. • Bears weight evenly on all feet with no shifting stance. • Walks normally, hind hoofprints match or are forward of front ones. • Speed is normal (e.g. for cattle speed is similar to a person walking). • Normal back curvature (i.e. flat) during movement. • Normal head position while walking. • Hindlimbs are parallel to the vertical line. 	No lameness	Yes
1	<p>Exhibits minor stiffness, shortness of stride or a slight limp but keeps up with normal animals in the group.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Walks unevenly with a limp or has a stiff gait. • May lift the limb when standing, though not lame when moving. • Walks slightly abnormally, hind footprints are slightly away from front footprints (i.e. slight short stepping). • Speed may be slower than normal (unless stressed) but will generally keep up with the herd/mob when animals are walking. • Back curvature may have a slight arched shape. • Head nods at walking. • Hindlimbs may have a slight deviation from the vertical line when moving. 	Mild lameness	No – unless under veterinarian advice Further investigation needed to determine if injury, disease, or other condition is likely to result in an increase in pain or distress during transport.
2	<p>Exhibits obvious stiffness, difficulty taking steps, an obvious limp or obvious discomfort and lags behind normal animals walking as a group.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Walks with difficulty but still mobile. • Obvious limp, stiffness or discomfort shown. • Likely to lift or rest the limb when standing and only partially weight bear on the limb when moving. • Speed may be slow (unless stressed then may try and move on 3 legs) and the animal cannot generally keep up with the herd or mob when walking and may be left behind. • The back may be arched when both standing and walking. • Noticeable head bobbing when walking. • Hind footprints may not reach front heels (i.e. short step). • May have a slight C-shaped movement with hooves while moving. 	Moderate lameness	No Likely to result in an increase in pain or distress during transport.
3	<p>Extremely reluctant to move even when encouraged by a handler.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Struggles to stand and walk and may become recumbent (lie down) to take pressure off painful limbs. • Unlikely to weight bear on the affected limb while standing or walking. • Speed likely to be very slow, with hesitation or reluctance to bear weight. • The animal cannot keep up with the herd or mob when walking, is left behind and is likely to become recumbent. • Back curvature has obvious arched shape. • Hind footprints if able to weight bear are noticeably short stepping. • Obvious vertical movement of the head while walking, head may nearly touch the ground when walking. • Hooves make a marked C-shape or circular movements. 	Severe lameness	No Cannot walk independently by bearing weight on all hooves and likely to result in an increase in pain or distress during transport.

(Adapted from a similar table in *Improving Animal Welfare (2nd Edition) A Practical Approach* edited by Temple Grandin (2015) and from Dairy Australia's Lameness Scoring Guide, available at: <https://www.dairyaustralia.com.au/animal-management-and-milk-quality/animal-health/lameness>)