

## What does a lousy sheep look like?

Typically, a lousy sheep will rub against a tree, fencepost etc or bite at their wool. While lice infestation is the most likely explanation for these signs, this behaviour may also be due to other causes.

A sheep with wool breaking away or looking especially “shaggy” may be lousy but, again, other things can cause this. For example, sheep that go through fences or graze in bush or among blackberries can have wool breaking away as can a sheep with a break in the wool.

If you see the above signs, you will need to yard the sheep and have a close look in the fleece.

## How do I know if the problem is lice?

If you have good eyesight, you may be able to see the lice in the wool. If you need glasses for reading, you’ll need to use them for checking the sheep. Either way, you may still need to use a magnifying glass. Lice can be very hard to see, especially if there are only a few of them on the animal.

Unless the sheep has been shedded (ie in the shade) for a long time, any lice are usually near the skin. If the wool is breaking away, that would be the best place to look first. Otherwise, the areas that tend to have the most lice are the flanks or along the backline.

Part the wool so that you can see right down to the skin. Lice are usually 1 or 2 mm long and have a creamy coloured body, sometimes with red or brown stripes, and a reddish head. Young lice are smaller and usually cream in colour, so can be harder to see.



*A sheep louse magnified 50 times*

Even if your sheep do not show obvious signs of lice, you should still inspect a random sample of your flock every month or so, as light lice infestations may not be obvious from a distance. Typically, lice numbers are low for the first few months off shears and build up considerably in the longer wool.

## What do I do if my sheep have lice?

Dipping involves saturating all sheep in the chemical – in a plunge dip, a sheep shower or by jetting the entire sheep. None of these options is likely to be practical for small flocks or pet sheep. And, if sheep are dipped “in the wool”, there are some serious pesticide contamination issues that may affect the price of your wool.

“Backliners” are chemicals that are applied along the backline of the sheep. Most backliner lice treatments work only on freshly shorn sheep.

If your sheep have a lice problem, the most practical solution is likely to be shearing the entire mob and treating with a backliner off-shears.

There are two types of backliner – SPs and IGRs. SPs are cheaper but may not be effective if your sheep have developed a “resistance” issue. IGRs are dearer but, so far, there are no known ‘resistance’ issues in Tasmania. “Resistance” is where the lice on your sheep have developed the ability to survive treatment – in other words, the treatment will not work. Underdosing is the most likely cause of “resistance” developing in your sheep.

### **Need more information ?**

Contact your local vet, rural merchandiser or phone DPIWE’s animal health branch on 1300 368 550

### **I treated my sheep for lice last year. How come they are still lousy ?**

The most likely explanation is that, when you backlined after the last shearing, you did not do it properly. Make sure you use the recommended dosages, always set the backliner gun according to the heaviest sheep in the mob and apply the chemical along the backline of the sheep.

It's possible your sheep are resistant to SP backliners, in which case you should switch to an IGR backliner. Your rural merchandiser can advise on your choices.

### **I haven't had lousy sheep before. How did the lice get into my sheep?**

If your sheep are lousy now, they may have had low levels of lice infestation for a long time. Don't rush to blame your neighbour's sheep!

It is possible you have bought or agisted sheep that were lousy. That is why it's generally a good idea to shear and backline any new arrivals before mixing them with your other sheep.

It's also possible a stray sheep with lice wandered onto your property or one of your sheep has strayed off your property and returned with lice. It's worth checking your boundary fences are sheep proof.

Neighbours' sheep can be a source of lice. As most backliners control lice for up to 3 months, if you and your neighbours shear and backline within a month or two of each other, that should be sufficient

Lice don't survive long in wool caught on fences, so this is unlikely to be a source

Sheep lice are specific to sheep. They do not infect or come from other animals or humans. The only exception to this is that goats have been known to host sheep lice for a few weeks and can therefore reinfest sheep where there is direct contact.

### **Are lice a serious problem?**

The bottom picture on the front of this pamphlet shows sheep that are suffering. You should treat the problem immediately.

In the top picture, the sheep are not suffering so there is not the same urgency to deal with the problem, other than ensuring your sheep are not able to infect your neighbour's sheep. However, if your sheep show these signs, it indicates your lice control methods are not working and you should work out why this is so.

If your sheep show no signs of lice, your control methods are working and no further action is normally necessary.



*A light infestation of lice. Note the wispy wool on the flank*

# **SHEEP LICE**

## **The basics for smallholders**



*A heavy infestation of lice. In extreme cases, the wool becomes matted.*