

# Introduction to Sheep and Goats

**W**HAT IS a sheep? What is a goat? Are they the same species or just very similar? Sheep and goats are closely related and even look much alike. Both were among the first animals to be domesticated and used for their food and fiber. Yet, some major differences exist. A sheep is usually heavier than a goat and has wool as its coat. A goat has a beard and a strong odor. Use this E-unit to explore the sheep and goat industry and identify key similarities and differences between the species.



## Objectives:



1. Describe the sheep and goat industry.
2. Explain terminology used to identify sheep and goats.
3. Compare and contrast the physical characteristics of sheep and goats.

## Key Terms:



buck	kid	ram
chamois	kidding	wether
dock	lamb	withers
doe	lambing	wool
ewe	mohair	yearling
hock	mutton	
horn butt	pastern	

## The Sheep and Goat Industry

Goats from the eastern Mediterranean area and Asia were domesticated about 9,000 years ago for assistance in trampling seeds into the ground. Sheep from Asia and Europe were domesticated a thousand years later. Both are mammals that have ruminant digestive tracts and

divided hooves. Both are important to the economy, with sheep slightly more in demand today. In other countries, sheep and goat consumption is greater than in the United States. Top producers of sheep are New Zealand and Australia, where both great demand and favorable conditions exist. The United States has more than 7.8 million sheep, which provide an annual average of 1.7 pounds of meat and 0.8 pounds of wool per person. In addition, sheep and goats are often used in areas where no other animal could be raised because of the climate and minimal feed available. Sheep are very efficient in converting feed into meat. Sheep generally graze on broadleaf plants and grasses, whereas goats prefer twigs and leaves.

Both sheep and goats provide a variety of products for humans, ranging from food to fiber. Food products from sheep and goats are from their meat and milk. Meat from sheep can be identified as lamb or mutton. Lamb is meat from a young sheep of either sex less than one year old, whereas **mutton** is meat from a sheep of either sex one year old or more. Mutton has a strong taste and is unpopular in the United States. Goat meat is often called chevon and is sometimes barbecued.

Goat's milk is more desirable than sheep's milk. In fact, goat's milk is easier to digest and contains even more Vitamin A than cow's milk. Both milks are used to make cheese products. For example, Roquefort cheese is a specific type of cheese made only from sheep's milk.

Fiber products, such as clothing, often begin in the sheep and goat industry. **Wool** is the soft coat of sheep. It is a major fiber used to make a variety of clothing and textile products. Sheep can average yields of 5 to 15 pounds of wool per shearing. Goats produce fibers of a variety of textures, from mohair to cashmere. In addition, sheep or goat skin can be transformed into a soft, flexible leather called **chamois** for cleaning and polishing vehicles. **Mohair** is taken from angora goats and is used to make a woolly fabric.



FIGURE 1. Wool from these sheep will be used to make clothing and other textiles (Courtesy, Agricultural Research Service, USDA)

## Sheep and Goat Terminology

A young sheep less than one year of age is called a **lamb**. A young goat less than one year of age is identified as a **kid**. A mature female sheep is called a **ewe**, whereas a mature female goat is identified as a **doe**. A **ram** is characterized as a male sheep primarily used for breeding, and a **buck** is identified as a male goat at any age. A **yearling** describes either a male or female sheep or goat at least one year of age but less than two years of age. A **wether** is a male sheep or goat castrated when it was young. Even the terminology for the process of giving birth dif-

fers between the species. For sheep it is identified as **lambing**, and for goats it is called **kid-ding**.

## Physical Characteristics of Sheep and Goats

Sheep range from 100 to more than 225 pounds at maturity and live for 7 to 13 years. Goats range from 20 to 150 pounds at maturity, with heights of 1½ feet to more than 4 feet, and live for 8 to 15 years. Just like other species, sheep and goats may be horned or polled. Male sheep and goats generally have horns, while the females are polled. The **horn butt** is located on the top of a goat's head and is the dull remainder of the animal's horns. The **withers** are located at the tip of the shoulders of both sheep and goats. The animals are measured for height from the withers to the hoof.

Producers strive for a sheep or goat with a long body and spread ribs, heavy muscling through the loin and leg, a trim breast, a trim flank, and widely set legs. Both sheep and goats have tails; however, before a sheep reaches maturity, the producer often cuts the tail at the **dock**, which is the rump or the tail setting on the animal. The **hock** is the knee portion of the back leg that connects the upper leg to the foot region. The dewclaw of a sheep or the fetlock

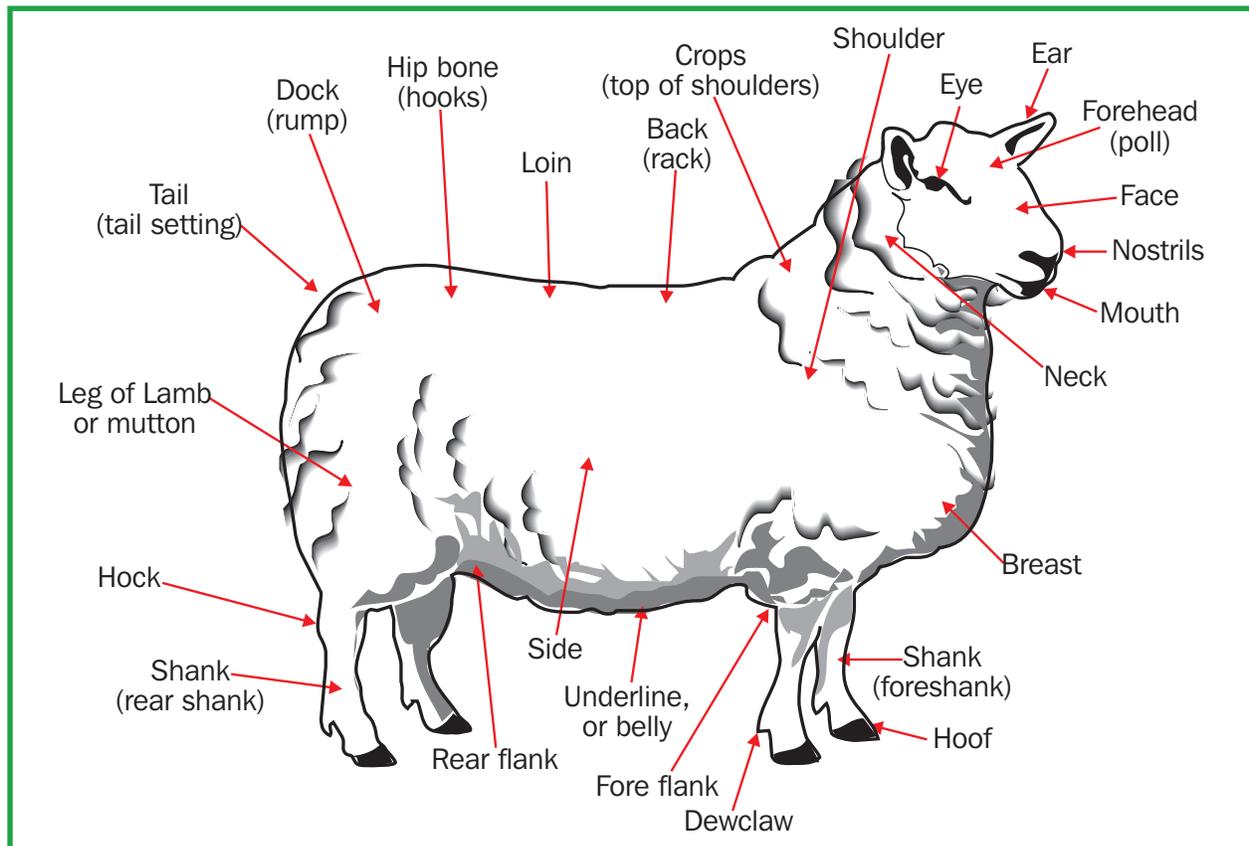


FIGURE 2. Physical characteristics of sheep.

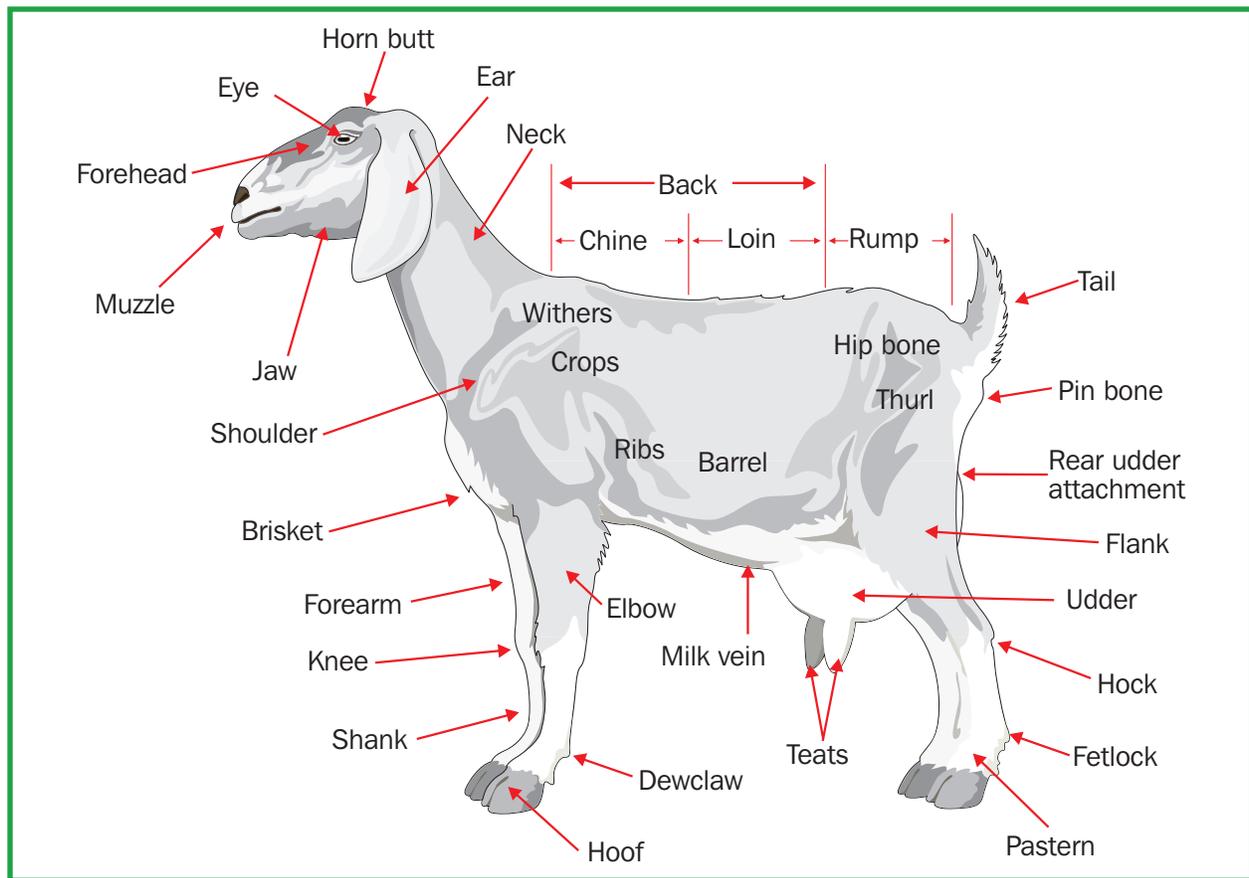


FIGURE 3. Physical characteristics of goats.

of a goat is the area directly above the hoof region. The **pastern** is between the hoof and the dewclaw or fetlock. This is a joint that greatly affects an animal's ability to walk and run and influences the way an animal can carry itself.

### Summary:



The sheep and goat species are very similar, with little differences in external appearances and terminology. Sheep are primarily used for meat and wool, whereas goats are primarily used for milk, meat, mohair, and cashmere and even as pets.

### Checking Your Knowledge:



1. What is a chamois?
2. What do we call a sheep or goat of either sex that is at least one year old but less than two years old?
3. What is mohair? What is it used for?
4. What is a hock?

## Expanding Your Knowledge:

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Draw a line down the middle of a sheet of paper. On the left side of the line at the top, write “Sheep,” and on the right side at the top, write “Goats.” Compare and contrast the differences between the two species. Consider external parts, uses, and even terminology.

## Web Links:

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### How Wool Is Graded

<http://www.ext.colostate.edu/pubs/livestk/01401.html>

### Fun Facts About Sheep

<http://www.uga.edu/~lam/kids/sheep/default.html>

### What’s So Great About Goats?

<http://www.uga.edu/~lam/kids/goats/default.html>