

Sheep lice:

Identification and spread



The sheep louse

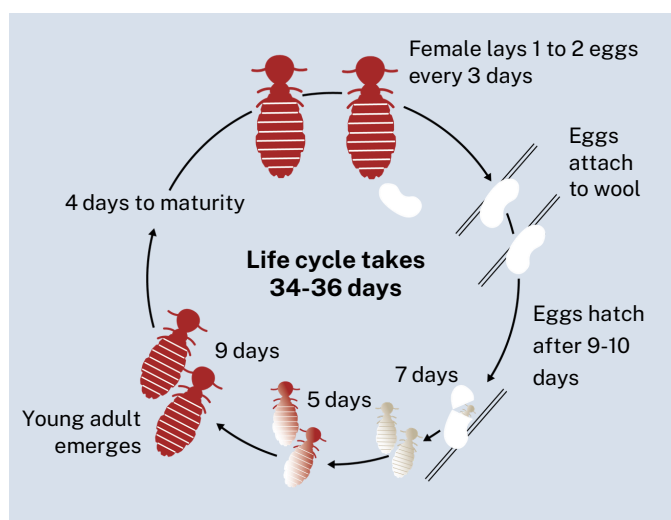
The sheep body louse (*Bovicola ovis*) is a small insect, less than 2mm in length (about a match head in size) with a broad red to brown head and red to brown stripes across the body, while juvenile lice (nymphs) are smaller with cream bodies. Sheep lice can be a common frustrating problem for producers causing production, wool loss & reduced income. The sheep body louse (*Bovicola ovis*) is responsible for most infestations in Australian sheep.



Light lice in Dorpers. Sheep lice can't jump, crawl on the ground or fly, they transfer by sheep-to-sheep contact.

Offences | Compliance | Consequences

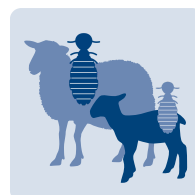
It's against the law to have sheep with lice in public places, including markets and saleyards, even if the sheep are just in transit. It's also illegal to let lice-infested sheep stray onto other properties **and roadways**. If this happens, both the owner and anyone responsible for managing the sheep can be fined.



Lice at different stages of life with lifecycles depending on temperature and humidity.

How do lice spread?

Lice spread primarily through direct contact between sheep, as they rarely survive for long in the environment without a host. Each livestock species has their own specific lice and are not transferable e.g. cattle lice to sheep. Flock infections can be caused by introduced infested sheep such as stray sheep or new purchases, or ineffective treatment.



ewes pass lice onto lambs



selling infected sheep is an offence



fine by authorities

June 2026



For more information visit
pir.sa.gov.au/animal-health or
call the Emergency Animal
Disease Hotline on **1800 675 888**

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Checking sheep for lice

Early detection and treatment can save time and money by reducing the infestation and limiting damage to the wool. Signs of lice infestation include rubbing, biting or have pulled wool. Lice in sheep can be seen by parting the wool and if present are likely to be near the skin, where they feed on skin fragments. However lice will crawl up the staple if sheep have been yarded for some time.

Follow these steps to effectively check for lice:

- inspect sheep in a well-lit area (lice move away from sunlight)
- part a 10 cm length of wool and look closely for lice
- check 10 parts of wool down the side of each sheep
- check areas where the sheep has pulled wool
- check as many sheep as possible.

When the wool is parted in the sunlight, the lice will move to bury themselves back into the wool away from the direct sunlight. Shearing removes most sheep lice, however, if sheep are not cleanly shorn with long tufts on wool remaining, the sheep lice will be harbouring in these and the infestation will continue.

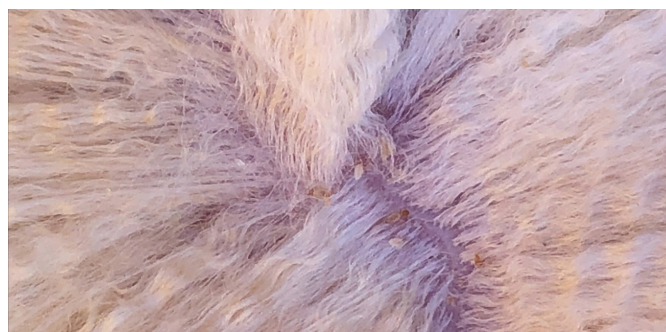
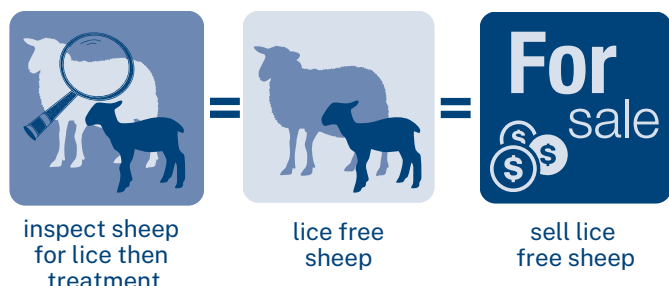


Image: Photo showing wool parting in well lit area with adult and nymph lice close to the skin.

Handy hints

- Shedding sheep can get lice
- Sheep can have both grass seeds & lice
- Rotate lice treatment chemical groups
- Muster all the sheep, don't leave any behind
- Ensure your boundary fences are stock proof
- Some chemical groups require cleanly shorn sheep for treatment.



Get the most for your valuable stock and avoid fines, inspect before selling.

PIRSA assistance

Check your sheep for lice before selling or moving them. Sheep without lice are healthier and perform better than those with lice. If you're unsure whether your sheep have lice or want to report stray sheep with lice, contact your local Animal Health Officer. Their contact details are available on the PIRSA website pir.sa.gov.au/biosecurity/animal_health/contact_us

PIRSA animal health staff can provide:

- ✓ **Correct diagnosis**
- ✓ **Lice management advice**
- ✓ **Lice treatment advice**



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Government
of South Australia
Department of Primary
Industries and Regions