

Providing pain relief

The new EU regulation on organic farming requires 'adequate' anaesthesia and/or analgesia for castration and tail docking.

Anna Bassett explains the practical implications

The new regulation on organic production came into effect in January 2009. Most of Article 18 of regulation 889/2008 is the same as the previous regulation, covering the potential authorisation of operations such as tail docking, dehorning and castration. But the second part of Article 18 (1) is new: it says that "any suffering to the animals shall be reduced to a minimum by applying adequate anaesthesia and/or analgesia and by carrying out the operation only at the most appropriate age by qualified personnel."

UK legislation

Existing UK legislation already covers some operations carried out on animals and the necessary need for pain relief. For example, The Protection of Animals (Anaesthetics) Act 1954 makes it an offence to disbud calves or dehorn any cattle without an anaesthetic (except when chemical cauterisation is used). Under the same Act it is an offence to castrate calves over two months of age and lambs over three months of age without an anaesthetic. However, this meant that organic animals still underwent operations that did not require the use of anaesthetic, such as the castration of calves before two months old and the castration and tail docking of lambs.

So why should organic producers consider pain relief when carrying out these operations – especially if UK legislation does require the use of anaesthetic? Well, one of the fundamental organic principles is the need to ensure the highest possible animal welfare for organic animals. Recent research confirms that these operations cause pain, and pain results in stress (see right).

Do I need to?

Having accepted that these operations are painful (see right) we should start by asking whether or not we need to carry them out at all.

The justification for castration of cattle is probably the easiest. Entire bulls can be more aggressive to both stock people and other cattle – and can cause problems with unwanted breeding. They also generally produce lower quality meat with abattoirs often stipulating slaughter by 16–18 months – difficult on an organic high forage ration. Castration eliminates all these problems.

The picture isn't quite so clear for the castration of lambs. Research shows no loss of meat quality from entire rams up to around a year old. If sheep producers can manage their flocks and split out ram lambs from ewe lambs to prevent



Recent research confirms that tail docking operations cause pain and stress

unwanted breeding, and if lambs are born in the spring and sold by Christmas (as is common in a lot of flocks), then castration is questionable. But you must avoid young ewe lambs getting caught by uncastrated ram lambs as this itself can lead to serious welfare problems; indeed, this is probably the most common justification for castration.

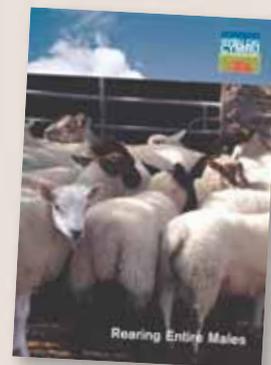
Likewise, many producers who had routinely tail docked lambs have implemented management techniques and found they no longer need to tail dock their meat lambs

What can I do instead?

Sheep have tails for a reason: tails protect the anus, vulva and udder. Some also believe that an undocked tail can help minimise fly strike by deterring flies from landing.

Anything that reduces dung soiling of the wool will also lessen the risk of fly strike. Attention to nutrition can help here: lambs on rich pastures with no access to dry forage, for example, will have very loose or liquid dung which is far more likely to stick to wool – and attract flies. The use of 'hair sheep' or naturally shedding breeds such as the Wiltshire Horn and the Easy care sheep is increasingly common. These sheep tend to have little wool around the tail area, making them less attractive to blowflies. Infection with internal parasites is a condition that can cause loose or liquid dung; management and treatment (when necessary) should help to keep on top of this.

Regular dagging or clipping around the breeches and tail to remove soiled wool will also help minimise fly strike. It is the length of wool and the amount of soiling around



FURTHER READING

Farm Animal Welfare Council (2008) *Report on the Implications of Castration and Tail Docking on the Welfare of Lambs*
www.fawc.org.uk

Meat Promotion Wales (2004) *Rearing Entire Males*
www.hccmpw.org.uk



the tail and breech area that leads to fly strike – not necessarily length of tail. The targeted use of pour-on or spray-on insecticides can also significantly reduce fly strike. Remember that some products only work as preventatives, while others both prevent and cure fly strike.

Final thoughts

Some producers may still need to castrate and tail dock. While it is not pain free, research shows that rubber ring castration of calves or lambs (and tail docking of lambs) at less than seven days old is the least painful method. For such operations there is no additional requirement for organic farmers to use anaesthetic or analgesic.

If, however, you are castrating or tail docking older lambs you will need to use pain relief – even when this is done at an age below the legal requirement. While the Soil Association does not currently require the use of pain relief for castration of calves up to two months of age, providing pain relief in such cases should certainly be considered as ‘best practice’.

If the practicalities of providing pain relief seem too onerous, take a minute to think about the operations you carry out and the reasons for doing so – are they really necessary? While you might think it’s a pain to provide anaesthetic and analgesia, think what the lamb or calf is going through if you don’t.

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Talk to your vet

Options for anaesthesia and pain relief for cattle include short acting local anaesthetics such as procaine hydrochloride, injected into the testicles or spermatic cord, or longer acting pain relief drugs such as xylazine (given alone or with local anaesthetics). Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) such as ketoprofen used alone, with local anaesthetics or xylazine, can also aid in pain relief. A local anaesthesia, combined with a systemic analgesic such as ketoprofen, eliminates pain caused by Burdizzo or surgical castration. However, ketoprofen alone may not eliminate pain-induced behaviour seen during castration. Producers are advised to castrate cattle as early as possible to avoid the need for pain relieving drugs. If you cannot avoid later castration discuss options for pain relief during castration with your vet.

No local anaesthetic is currently licensed in the UK for use in sheep. Research shows that lignocaine hydrochloride is highly effective when castrating or tail docking sheep. A similar product – procaine hydrochloride – is licensed for use in cattle. Vets can prescribe its use in sheep but this incurs an ‘off licence’ organic withdrawal period of 56 days. If you cannot castrate or tail dock lambs within their first seven days speak to your vet about pain relief options. If you cannot use pain relief you will need to justify castration or tail docking – and the reasons why you cannot obtain or administer pain relief – in your health plan.

Think about the operations you carry out – and the reasons for doing so

Yes, it hurts

Castration

The testes and scrotum are richly supplied with nerves and any modification to them will cause immediate pain that can last for some time. All physical methods of castration will cause some pain that can be exhibited both during and after castration. Scientific research to date has looked at castration at different ages, as well as the different types of castration, with varying results in terms of what is considered to be the most or least painful method or age. But the overall conclusion is that the older the animal is, the greater the pain experienced.

Tail docking

Although tail docking of lambs is usually performed (and justified) to avoid the serious welfare problems associated with fly strike, research shows that tail docking is itself a key welfare issue. Tail docking is usually carried out by using rubber rings, emasculators, hot docking iron or – in some instances – a scalpel. In the last 10 years, numerous research projects have demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that the tail docking of lambs causes significant pain and distress – regardless of the technique used or the age of the lambs involved.