

# Condition Scoring Ewes

## Practical Guide



Farm  
Advisory  
Service

*Condition scoring sheep is a simple, effective and cheap management tool for all flock owners to use.*

### 1. Who needs to Condition Score?

All flock managers should condition score their ewes and tups. It is an effective tool to allow you to gain knowledge that management and feeding regimes are meeting the needs of the sheep at a specific time of year.

If animals are not on target then management changes must be made in plenty of time, otherwise problems can occur, such as oversized lambs, or ewes with no milk. Acting on the results of condition scoring will benefit your flock, e.g., more, heavier and healthier lambs. It doesn't take long to do and is easy to learn.

### 2. What is Condition Scoring?

Condition scoring is a score of fat and muscle, between 1 and 5, where 1 is very lean and 5 is very fat. A guide of body condition scores 1-5 is shown below.



Picture 1 - Condition Scoring a Scottish Blackface Ewe

#### Our Practical Guide covers:

1. Who needs to Condition Score.
2. What is Condition Scoring.
3. How to Condition Score.
4. When to Condition Score.

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	Spine	Muscle	Fat
Condition Score 1	Sharp	Wasted	Non Cover
Condition Score 2	Sharp	Little	Little Cover
Condition Score 3	Rounded	Full	Moderate Cover
Condition Score 4	Barely felt	Full	Thick Cover
Condition Score 5	Impossible to Feel	Fat Covered	Very Thick Cover



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### 3. How to Condition Score?

It is very simple; all that is required is to feel for the short ribs of the sheep (immediately after the 13 long ribs) using the balls of your fingers and your thumb. Initially, feel the backbone with your thumb, and the end of the short rib with your finger tip.

Feel for the muscle and fat cover around the ends of these areas. The roundness of the ends of the bones, the tissue between bones and fullness of the muscle gives you a condition score.

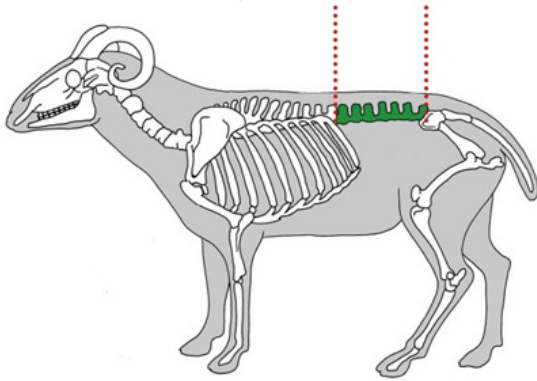


Figure 1 - Position hand in green



Picture 2 - Position of hand to condition score a sheep

See the Technical Note for descriptions and diagrams of how to assess each score. If you are unsure, ask your advisor or local vet to demonstrate condition scoring on your flock.

### 4. When to Condition Score?

There are four key times throughout the year to condition score sheep:

Weaning	Tupping
Scanning/Mid Pregnancy	Late Pregnancy/Lambing

Ideally whenever you are handling your sheep a proportion could be condition scored to help you decide if ewes need better feed, or less feed, or whether to split them into different feeding groups.

Condition scoring ewes allows you to make management changes in good time to ensure the ewe is in the optimum condition for the time of year. The target condition scores are shown below. These are suggested targets and will differ with the range of breeds, types and systems of sheep enterprises practiced in Scotland.

	Lowland	Upland	Hill
<b>Weaning</b>	2.5	2.0	2.0
<b>Tupping</b>	3.5	3.0	2.5
<b>Scanning</b>	3.0	2.5	2.0
<b>Lambing</b>	3.0	2.5	2.0

## Weaning – July/August/September

Weaning time is a useful opportunity to make changes before starting the next breeding year at tugging time.

**Look out for:** Ewes, especially gimmers and multiple-rearing mothers may have lost considerable condition whilst rearing their lambs.

**Benefit:** Increasing condition from a 2.0 to a 3.0 in an upland ewe will increase the lambs carried or scanning percentage per ewe.

**What to do:** Fat ewes can be put on a maintenance diet whereas thin ewes can receive preferential treatment. Discuss findings with a vet e.g. if there are a lot of thin ewes, perhaps the worming/fluke strategy is not working.

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## Tugging – October/November

**Look out for:** Ewes in the wrong condition (too fat or too thin) at tugging can show problems such as coming into oestrous (heat) slowly or erratically. This can have knock on effects with a prolonged lambing period and foetal reabsorption.

**Benefit:** Having sheep in the correct condition at tugging time ensures they are in the best physical condition for surviving through the winter.

**What to do:** It's not too late to feed thin ewes – a little bit of feed such as good grass or sugar beet pulp will help increase condition score and also increase the likely number of eggs and therefore lambs.



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## Scanning – January/February

An excellent time for condition scoring sheep in mid pregnancy is at pregnancy scanning. The sheep are being handled for the process and it will not incur additional handling and stress to the animals. Even if not scanning, you may well be handling the ewes for fluke treatments etc.

**Look out for:** After scanning you can split the flock depending on the number of lambs carried to make feeding more cost effective and targeted.

**Benefit:** Benefits of condition scoring at scanning and pre lambing followed by management changes to achieve target condition for lambing leads to: fewer difficult births, good lamb birth weight, thrifty lambs born, good source of quality colostrum and milk and high lamb viability.

**What to do:** Ewes can be put in separate groups and feed rationed accordingly e.g. thin single-bearing ewes can be fed along with twin-bearing ewes, whilst fat twin-bearing ewes can be fed along with singles.

A unit of condition score equates to about 12% of the ewes liveweight, so a 60kg ewe would need to lose or gain about 7kg to move a body condition score. This level of weight loss/gain takes management and time. As 70% of a lamb's foetal growth is in the last 6 weeks of pregnancy, in the last 45 – 50 days of pregnancy you do not want any dramatic changes in body condition score.

## Lambing – March/April/May

The ewes must be in suitable condition for rearing lambs by producing adequate colostrum and milk supplies as well as maintaining themselves.

**Look out for:** Thin ewes might be too weak to lamb, or will produce no or little milk. Fat ewes might have difficulty lambing, resulting in dead lambs, or damage to the ewe.

**Benefit:** High quality and quantity of colostrum and milk helps to prevent losses and increases immunity against disease in the young lambs. Ewes in good condition are proven to be better mothers than thin ewes.

**What to do:** Just before lambing time is a very difficult time to change condition score, because of the risk of oversized lambs, so thin ewes need very careful management and a flat rate of feed. After lambing, thin ewes can be offered concentrate feed until there is sufficient grass, to help with milk production. Fat ewes will need less or no extra concentrate feed.

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### Example: Hill Ewes



Condition Score 1.5    Condition Score 2.0    Condition Score 2.5    Condition Score 3.0

As the picture above demonstrates, it is difficult to condition score ewes by eye. These ewes have been condition scored at tupping time in November, with a full fleece. By eye the sheep at condition score 2.5 looks leaner than the sheep at 2.0, but the sheep at 2.0 has more fleece than the 2.5 sheep making her look in better condition.

Condition scoring - easy to learn and simple to do -  
allows you to make management changes with a positive effect on your flock.