

# Sheep & Beef News

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## **In this issue:**

- + Should I Put Salt Out for the Ewes Around Lambing Time?**
- + Monthly Reminders**

**VET + ENT**

# Should I Put Salt Out for the Ewes Around Lambing Time?

**Will Cuttance, discusses the pros and cons to putting salt out for ewes and other potential benefits of topdressing salt.**

There are a few myths out there about salt for ewes. Some suggest that supplementing with salt could increase the risk of bearings. Other anecdotal evidence suggests supplementing ewes with salt can reduce bearings. On top of that “the ewes really go for it!” so they must be deficient....

## **The short answer...**

There is no evidence that low salt intake will reduce ewe lactation performance or significantly affect the number of ewes that get bearings. The ewes really go for it for the same reason we all go for salty chips – salt tastes good! Put the time and money you would have spent on buying and spreading salt into relaxing with a drink and some salty chips.

If you are over sowing a hill block and want to use hoof and tooth to get the seed established then topdressing with salt should get the ewes to eat down low and remove more of the existing pasture than they would without salt.

Animals can take in too much salt, especially if there is not enough access to water. In the majority of situations sheep, cattle and deer don't need extra salt so why take the risk of giving too much?

## **The long answer...**

To answer the question we need to know how much salt a ewe needs and what happens if she doesn't get enough. Salt is sodium chloride. Chloride is made from chlorine and deficiency in animals is unheard of. So what about sodium?

## **How much do they need?**

The recommended sodium requirement for sheep is 0.9 g salt/kgDM which is provided when pasture is over 0.1% sodium. For a 60 kg twin ewe in peak lactation that's about 3 g/day. Pasture sampling surveys from around NZ, including inland Canterbury far from any salt spray from the coast, show plant concentrations over this level except in plants that don't put sodium into their leaves like Kikuyu, Timothy and Lucerne. So

unless the ewes are lambing on these pasture plants they are likely to be getting enough sodium every day.

## **What happens if they don't get enough?**

Sheep (and cattle and deer) are very good at recycling sodium within the body. A UK study compared twinning ewes fed a low sodium diet (0.2 g/day) with those fed a high sodium diet (2.2 g/day) for two years and found no difference in either year between the groups in ewe milk production, lamb liveweight gain to weaning at eight weeks old and even sodium content of milk. When they couldn't recycle enough sodium the ewes on the low sodium diet used potassium in its place until the extra sodium demand of lactation dropped off. For comparison, a 60 kg ewe on ryegrass/clover in NZ might get around 1.3 g sodium per day averaged across the year, more than enough for high animal performance.

## **What else can salt do?**

Salt topdressing onto pasture can increase feed intake for the same reason we like salty chips – salt tastes good! This has been shown in a study in Central Otago where plots were grazed by Merino ewes with lambs at foot. On the plots that got salt, the percentage of bare ground increased from 20% before salt was topdressed to 50-60% 2 days after topdressing. The ewes were eating down to the dirt to get the tasty salt. Not an ideal outcome if you want “grass to grow grass”, but could be useful when over sowing a block and you want to use hoof and tooth to remove old pasture and get the new seed established.

## **Too much of a good thing?**

Uncontrolled access to salt such as in salt blocks or with topdressing can result in too much salt being eaten, especially when there is poor access to drinking water. This can lead to decreased feed intake, poor weight gain, and increased risk of milk fever and grass staggers. Why take the risk when your stock are unlikely to benefit from access to extra salt in the first place?





## Monthly Reminders

- + Create or update your winter feed budget to get an idea of what feed you might have by lambing time. This is particularly important this year with low feed levels on many farms heading into winter. Contact Will Cuttance at the VetEnt Te Kuiti if you want some help to put this together. Alternatively, call 0800 233 352 to access the free feed planning service being offered through Beef+Lamb NZ.
- + Check copper levels in cattle or supplement if you already know your copper status.
- + FEC for ewe lambs/hoggets to guide the decision on when to drench next as they should be building some immunity and may not need a drench.
- + BVD blood test replacement heifers to make sure no PI's are going to be kept.
- + Chat to your vet about pre-lamb treatments for ewes and make a plan that fits your farm.
- + Pre-calving blood samples to check mineral and magnesium levels are ok.
- + Lepto vaccinations for cows and heifers if not already done.

There have been some staff changes in our clinics recently. In our Te Kuiti clinic we have said farewell to Olivia Buckley and welcome to Tara Gower and Ellie Milnes. Tara has moved up from our Taumarunui clinic and Ellie is back from overseas. We also welcomed back Rochelle Thomas to our Taumarunui clinic.