An Improved and Safer Technique for Castration of Feeder Lambs

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Most male lambs are castrated early in life. Lamb castration at an early age is more convenient for the producer and causes less trauma to the lambs.

However, lamb feeders and purebred breeders are often faced with quite mature ram lambs that they would prefer were wethers. Ram lambs in a shipment of feeder lambs are usually the result of lambs missed by the producer. Unwanted ram lambs in purebred flocks usually started out as breeding ram prospects but have been culled for failure to develop according to the breeder's criteria.

It is well known that young rams grow faster and more efficiently and produce leaner carcasses than comparable wethers. However, leaving feeder lambs intact leads to management problems and often results in their discount at slaughter.

Castration by previous methods of ram lambs over 50 pounds or older than 6 months often has led to growth setbacks and increased mortality. A new technique developed by OSU researchers allows castration of quite mature ram lambs without noticeable setback. The technique has been used in a trial on 85-pound ram lambs with no reduction in weight gain patterns and no infection or mortality, and it has been used on cull purebred ram lambs as large as 130 pounds. As with all surgical procedures, anesthetic should be applied before surgery is performed.

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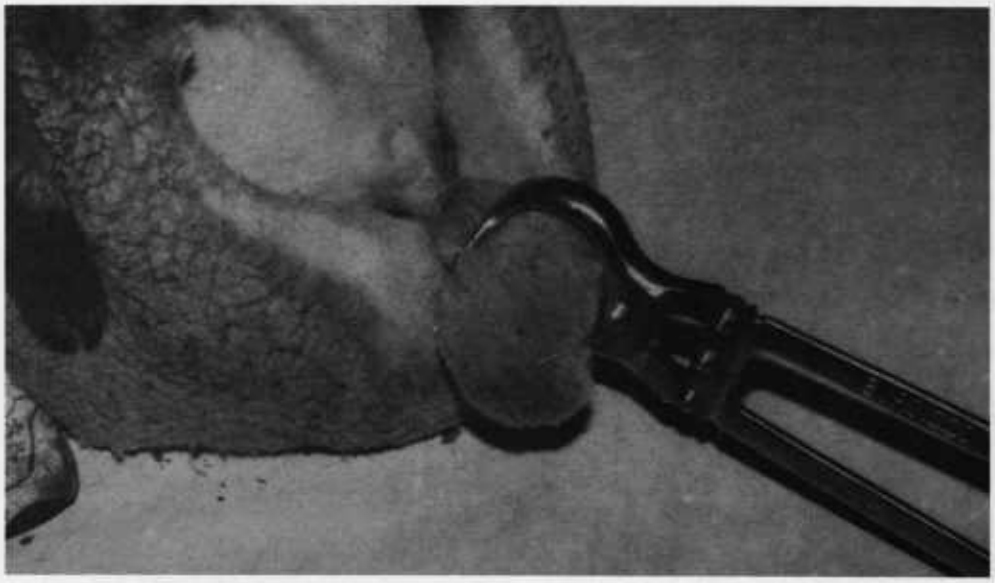
Procedure

Step 1. Place an elastrator band over the scrotum and position it near the nipples. This is usually the most difficult part of the procedure due to the large testicle size. It is best accomplished on wooly lambs if the scrotum is first shorn. The scrotal skin is first maneuvered through the elastrator band then the testicles are "popped" through the elastrator into the scrotum one at a time. It is helpful to use a brand of elastrator which opens the band as widely as possible. The band should be placed at the top of the scrotal neck and quite near the lamb's abdomen.

Step 2. Apply a large size (bull) emasculatome about one inch below the elastrator band to crush the spermatic cords. Both cords should be contacted at the same time.



Step 3. With the emasculatome clamped in place, sever the scrotum and its contents inside the closed emasculatome jaws. A thin-bladed knife such as a fillet knife works best for this step.

Step 4. Remove the emasculatome and allow the severed spermatic cords to retract through the elastrator band into the body cavity. If the cords do not spontaneously withdraw, pull the remnant of scrotal skin away from the body and the cord ends will disappear.

Step 5. Animals may be injected with antibiotic to reduce risk of infection although such problems should be minimal if lambs are kept dry and clean for a few days after castration.

Step 6. Disinfectant should be applied, and fly control should be practiced as for any wound.

Advantages of this technique

The combined crushing and near-sterile severing of the spermatic cords minimizes bleeding and risk of infection. The elastrator band closes off the avenue for subsequent infection while preventing bleeding from the severed scrotum. An absolute minimum of tissue remains for swelling or necrosis. Failure to adequately crush the spermatic cords can lead to bleeding within the abdominal cavity and necessitate removal of the elastrator band to allow drainage.

Use good husbandry practices including sterilization of tools between operations and disinfecting the area to be operated. Lambs should be quietly moved around for a couple of days after surgery to reduce stiffness.

In studies at Oregon State University, ram lambs castrated by this technique at 85 pounds grew faster and more efficiently than similar lambs castrated at 50 pounds. Both groups were superior in growth and feed efficiency to wethers castrated at birth. Delaying castration produced successively leaner carcasses, but all carcasses graded choice when lambs were slaughtered at 110 pounds. No cases of infection or internal bleeding were noted.

Lamb feeders and purebred breeders can convert undesirable ram lambs into marketable wethers of higher value. As consumers demand leaner cuts of meat, late castration may become an increasingly valuable procedure while allowing producers the advantages of improved lamb growth and feed efficiency.

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