

# SHEEP — THE WOOL PRODUCERS

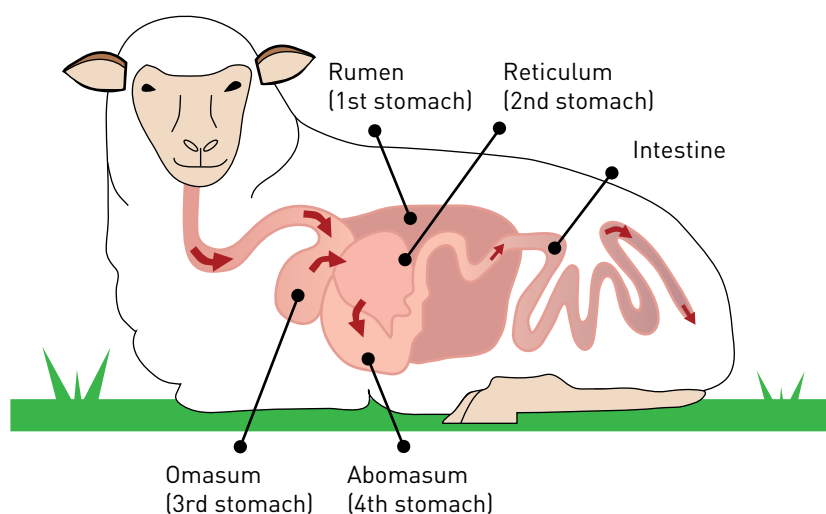


Sheep are domestic animals raised on farms for their wool, meat and milk.

Sheep belong to a group of animals called **mammals**. Like other **mammals**, sheep give birth to live young (lambs) and suckle them on milk until they can support themselves by grazing on **pasture**.

Because they are **herbivores**, sheep only eat plants and rely on farmers to ensure they have enough **pasture, hay, grain** and water to stay healthy.

Sheep also are **ruminants**, which means they have four stomachs and chew **cud**. Each stomach performs a different job during the process of digestion.



## Fast facts

- Sheep are domestic animals raised for wool, meat and milk.
- As herbivorous **mammals**, sheep only eat plant material — they do not eat meat.
- Sheep are **ruminants** (they have four stomachs).

## The digestive process

As sheep graze, they eat quickly, only chewing their food briefly, mixing it with saliva before swallowing.

## Digestion

The first stop in the digestive process is the rumen (first stomach).

The rumen contains digestive juices and millions of **microbes** that start

to break down the food. This process produces lots of gas (including methane), which sheep get rid of by burping.

About an hour after entering the rumen, muscles push the partially digested food back to the mouth to be chewed again.



**Natural born fibre producers:** Australian Merino sheep are domesticated animals whose natural ability to produce wool has been tailored through rigorous selective breeding.



**Chewing the cud:** After food has been in the rumen for about an hour it is regurgitated as cud, which sheep chew to extract more nutrients before it passes into the reticulum (second stomach) for further digestion.

Sheep often appear to be resting as they chew their **cud** as they are not actively grazing.

This additional chewing helps break the food down further before it is swallowed again, passing into the reticulum (second stomach).

The reticulum stores the juices from the chewed-up food, which then passes into the omasum (third stomach).

Muscles in the folds of the omasum squeeze the food to remove any remaining liquid.

The food then moves to the abomasum (fourth stomach), where it is mixed and churned with more digestive juices. It then passes into the intestine where nutrients are absorbed into the bloodstream. The remaining waste is excreted as urine and manure.

## Did you know?

- Sheep are not the only ruminants. Other **ruminants** include cattle, goats, giraffes, deer, gazelles, moose and antelopes.
- Sheep prefer to eat shorter grass, rather than long grass. They thrive on **pasture** shorter than 100 millimetres.
- During drought, sheep producers sometimes need to feed sheep with hay and grain when there is not enough **pasture** available.
- Sheep can drink up to 12 litres of water every day, although this will vary depending on the type of feed they are eating, their size and age, the season (summer vs winter) and the weather conditions.

## Glossary

**Cud** — partially-digested food.

**Hay** — pasture that has been cut, dried, baled and stored to feed livestock when there is not enough pasture available.

**Herbivore** — animals that only eat plant material.

**Mammals** — vertebrate, milk-producing animals, usually with four legs and hair or fur, most of which give birth to live young.

**Microbes** — microscopic living organisms that aid in the process of digestion.

**Pasture** — plants that are managed by farmers for livestock production.

**Ruminant** — an animal with four stomachs.



**Feed on offer:** Depending on the amount and quality of pasture available, sheep can spend up to 12 hours a day eating and walk many kilometres as they graze (eat).

## More information

**For more information about sheep, go to:**

- [learnaboutwool.com](http://learnaboutwool.com)
- Beyond the Bale: [beyondthebale.wool.com](http://beyondthebale.wool.com)
- [feedonofferlibrary.com](http://feedonofferlibrary.com)

