

VALAIS BLACKNOSE SHEEP

Care Guide

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Valais Blacknose sheep (VBNs) are loveable and good-natured animals and are an attractive sight in fields and paddocks. Their Swiss Alpine origin makes them unique and they attract a lot of attention when taken to agricultural shows. Keeping them however is not for the faint hearted – their value and their management (to protect that investment) means that careful thought needs to be given to taking them on, especially if you have never kept sheep before. You may view them as pets, but they must be treated as livestock with all that that entails.

If you keep sheep already you will be well aware of the ups and downs of looking after livestock – their welfare needs, including how much land you will need and whether buildings are a necessity, their feeding regimes, the legal documentation involved and an understanding of the multitude of diseases sheep can be prone to. If you already keep pedigree stock then again you will be up to speed on breeding programmes, showing standards, and the requirements of the relevant breed society.

If, however you have not owned sheep before then you will need to familiarise yourself with these matters before embarking on buying Valais Blacknose sheep, here are some useful tips to get you started.



ESSENTIAL ITEMS

- Plenty of grazing land
- Shelter/access to sheds
- Water trough – there must always be fresh water available
- Hay racks (place hayracks at ground level to avoid seeds getting into your sheep's fleeces)
- A quality vitamin lick for sheep should always be available
- Terramycin or Engemycin Antibiotic Spray (available from your vets)
- Fly strike preventative treatment
- Wormer
- Hoof trimmers
- A good vet



NEWLY PURCHASED SHEEP

On arrival onto the farm holdings all sheep should undergo a minimum six-day isolation period where they should not come into contact with other sheep, or where they do all sheep are kept as an isolated flock. This is the ideal time to check identification is correct and sheep are in good health. The gold standard is a four to six-week quarantine period to protect against disease.

GENERAL CARE & ADVICE

Valais Blacknose sheep are a very rare and characterful breed of sheep, often behaving more like a friendly dog than a sheep, however they are still sheep and need a lot of care and attention to ensure they are kept healthy and happy. You should analyse your sheep daily and if you spot anything that doesn't look right, act on it. Hopefully this guide will highlight the key things to look out for and ways to prevent problems from occurring.



FEEDING

Typical stocking densities on productive grass can be approximately 6-10 sheep per acre. However, the stocking density will vary according to climate, topography, and grass quality (both farm specific and seasonal variations). If you stick to the rule of 6-10 sheep to an acre, you shouldn't need to supplement feed hard food unless you want to. If you do, good quality sheep nuts are the best and around 0.5-0.75kg per sheep per day is a general guide. The amount of concentrate feed required will depend on the forage quantity and quality available, the amount of time before lambing and the number of lambs. For rams opt for a coarse mix. For lambs, use lamb creep hard food between 2 weeks and 5 months of age after which the females can progress onto ewe nuts and the males a ram coarse mix. (never let rams or ram lambs eat ewe nuts). Plenty of good quality hay is especially important in winter when the grass quality is not as good.

IMMUNISING YOUR FLOCK

For the active immunisation of sheep Heptavac-P Plus is an aid in the control of lamb dysentery, pulpy kidney, struck, tetanus, braxy, blackleg, black disease, clostridial metritis caused by *Clostridium perfringens* types B, C and D, *Cl.septicum*, *Cl.novyi*, *Cl.chauvoei* and *Cl.tetani*. The vaccine may be used in the control of pneumonic pasteurellosis in sheep of all ages from a minimum age of 3 weeks and systemic pasteurellosis in weaned fattening and breeding sheep. Lambs should ideally receive their first clostridial vaccination when they are approximately 4-6 weeks of age, followed by a booster 4 weeks later. The re-vaccination scheme recommends the administration of booster injections at intervals of no more than 12 months. In adult breeding ewes these yearly booster injections should be given 4-6 weeks prior to lambing.



FLY STRIKE

Don't take any chances especially when sheep are in full fleece for showing during the Summer months. As soon as the weather starts to warm up take measures to protect your flock against fly strike. Areas to watch are around the sheep's horns, their hooves, and around their rear ends. If you spot any signs of fly strike i.e. flies buzzing around and landing on an area of a sheep, lameness, stamping, nibbling/skin irritation, loss of wool or if you can already see eggs and/or maggots, immediately clean and treat the infected area accordingly. Shearing twice a year and a preventative care plan will help in the management of fly strike. There are multiple products available i.e. Crovect, Spot on but CLiK Extra is longer lasting and provides 16 weeks' worth of protection.



WORMING

Worm control is a vital part of health and production management in sheep flocks in the UK, a good control is highly dependent on effective anthelmintics. Numerous preventative drenches are available, but it is recommended to alternate products to minimize treatment resistance. Alternatively, you can worm according to faecal analysis which you can take regularly from your flock throughout the year then worm only as required. Remember that lambs are more susceptible to worms than older sheep and it's recommended to worm ewes pre lambing. Something to look out for that's often as sign of worms is when sheep have mucky rear ends. This can simply be caused by fresh grass, but you can drench as a precaution (if within treatment parameters) or take a faecal sample and have it tested. Additionally, Fluke dosing is very important especially if you are geographically placed in the wetter parts of the country. For the best advice speak to your vet and make a herd health plan of when to fluke/worm as they can work out if you are in a high-risk area or not and to prevent resistance.





HOOF CARE

The most common causes of foot problems are scald (interdigital dermatitis), footrot, shelly hoof, white line (toe) abscesses, and toe granuloma (strawberry foot). Overgrown hooves can also be painful and cause problems therefore paying regular attention to hooves and trimming only when necessary is paramount. If you notice one of your sheep is limping or holding a hoof up this generally indicates a problem. Valais Blacknose are prone to foot problems to treat simply hose feet and remove any debris, remove wool between hooves and administer antibiotic spray. The most common sprays are Terramycin or Engemycin which you can buy from your veterinary practice, be sure to stand your sheep on a hard surface following application until the spray dries before returning them to the fields. Another alternative is regular foot baths with Zincoped or the Footvax treatment & prevention plan. Foot check at regular 4-6-week intervals should help to avoid problems.

SHEARING



Due to their longwool and fast-growing fleeces Valais Blacknose require shearing twice a year for optimal health and wool quality. The best time for this is February which coincides with show season and enables fleeces to achieve the minimum 5-6 months (10cm staple length) growth that is required for competing, then again at the end of August/beginning of September post show season. If particularly cold at the time of shearing you will need to house the sheep for a few weeks, also note that shearing dates can be adjusted accordingly if you are not showing your stock. Lambs should be shorn for the first time at around 6 months of age.

BREEDING AGE

As a large, relatively slow-maturing breed, Valais Blacknose ewes in Switzerland are usually not bred until they are over 12 months of age, normally lambing for the first time at 18-24 months old at which point the animal is mature enough to cope with both pregnancy and labour. As ewes need time to recondition post lambing its vital to condition score at weaning, or at the very latest eight weeks before tugging. They are also nonseasonal breeders, with a reproduction rate of 1.6 lambs per year, however it is recommended to breed naturally once a year.



LAMB WEANING

The timing of weaning is dictated by the development of the lamb's rumen – wean too early and the animal will be unable to digest pasture or other feeds. Even when the rumen is sufficiently developed, withdrawing nutrients dese-milk could affect lamb growth. As animals age, their efficiency at converting feed into growth decreases, therefore young lambs must have the best grass or feed to replace declining milk supply. We would advise weaning lambs at a minimum of 4 months old (dependant on growth rate), or slightly later for lambs born late in the year that won't have access to fresh spring grass. You can use lamb creep hard food between 2 weeks and 5 months of age after which they can progress onto ewe nuts and ram coarse mix.

CASTRATION

It is advised to castrate ram lambs that do not comply with the breed standard, we want to breed the best we can in this country and stay true to the Swiss breeding standard so making sure the rams used are correctly marked and shaped is paramount for pedigree flocks.



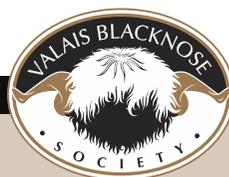


HANDLING

Valais Blacknose sheep are usually very docile and easy to manage when performing routine healthcare checks. However, do not handle the sheep by their horns until they are at least 12 months of age as they are brittle and can be damaged. For showing you can use a collar, or a halter depending on your preference or go Swiss and let the sheep roam free depending on show regulations and remember ewes can also wear the traditional Swiss bells (rams do not wear bells).

INSURANCE

Due to the high value of the sheep, we recommend breeders insure their sheep. There are several companies who provide cover against all sorts of disasters including flooding, worrying, lightning, or theft.



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As a society we always recommend you consult your veterinary practice for specific health, care advice and plans.