

Sarcocystis

factsheet

Key messages

- Cats play the role of primary host to sarcocystis ('sarco').
- The incidence of sarco is on the rise and having significant impacts on carcase value at the point of processing.
- Breaking the disease life cycle is the only option currently available to sheep producers looking to minimise impacts.
- Effective disposal of carcasses (through immediate burning and burial), stopping cats from accessing feedstuffs such as hay and grain and consistent feral cat control are key management tools.
- Avoid feeding cats raw sheep meat as an added precaution, breaking the disease cycle.

What is sarco?

Sarco is a single-celled organism and a two-host parasite. This means it requires two different hosts (a prey intermediate host and a predator primary host) to complete its life cycle.

There are many species of sarco (and many different hosts), but the sarco that damages sheep carcasses has the cat as predator host.

Economic impacts

Heavy infestations of cysts can lead to carcase damage, infected animals are identified at the point of processing (abattoir).

In moderate to light infestations contaminated muscle tissue is trimmed. In heavy infestations, an entire carcase may be condemned.

Sheep processors in Tasmania are seeing a significant increase in the number of carcasses coming through with sarco. In one instance, 140 carcasses carrying a heavy infestation of cysts in the muscle tissue were condemned from a line of 350 mutton — a loss of 40%.

The greatest impacts are coming from properties that border rural townships, where the incidence of feral cats is greatest.

Parasite lifecycle

The lifecycle of sarco is a bit like the chicken and the egg scenario — it's a bit difficult to see which comes first (see Figure 1). The important thing is to try and break the cycle.

It is important to note that the forms of sarco found in sheep do not infect humans.

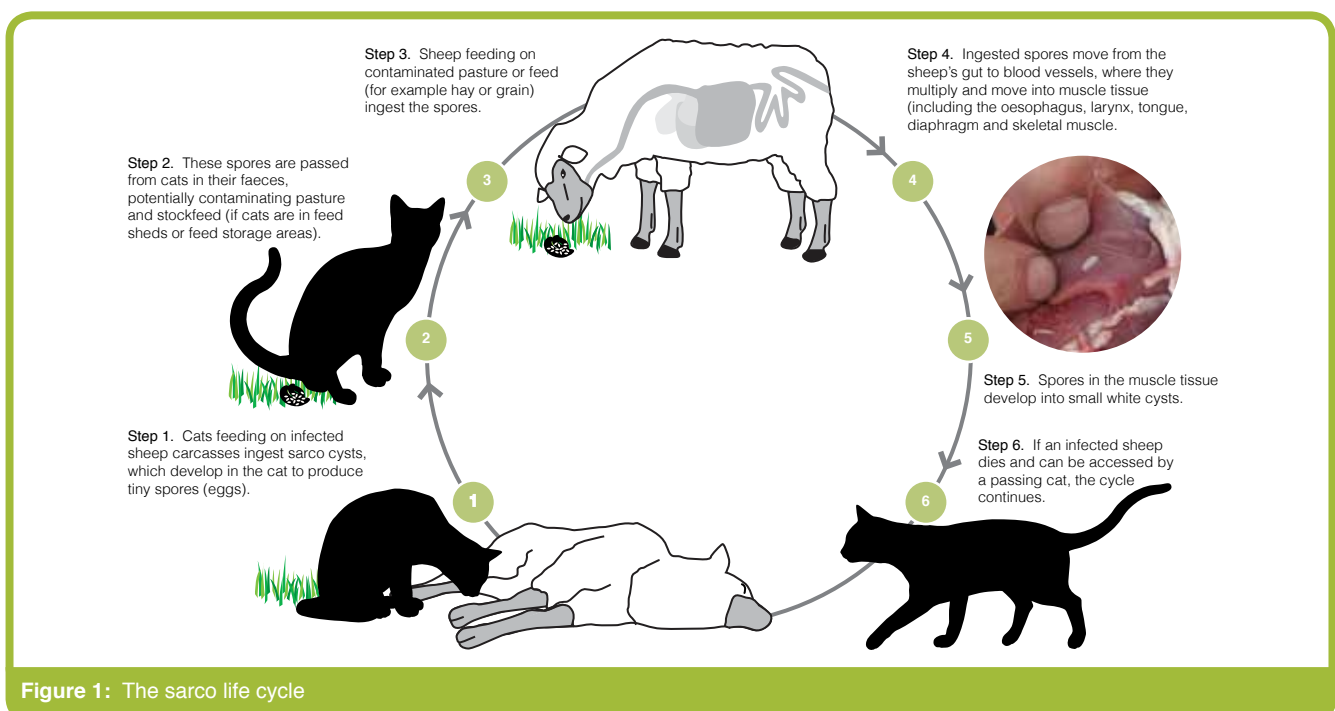


Figure 1: The sarco life cycle

Diagnosis

Sarco rarely leads directly to livestock death, and there are no outward signs of infection. Infection is usually picked up at the point of processing with the identification of cysts in muscle tissue.

Treatment and prevention

There are no preventative treatments (drenches or vaccinations) available for sarco. Disposing of livestock carcasses by immediate burial, placing in a secure offal pit, or burning, and controlling cat populations around feed sources are the best management options currently available.

Where possible, keep livestock feed secure from access by cats.

Because cats are territorial, it is safer to have a stable population of mature, desexed, immune cats around the house and farm sheds rather than a succession of young, possibly 'infectious' (excreting the sarco and toxo spores) group of young ferals that are periodically 'cleaned out' of the area.

Avoid feeding domestic cats (and dogs) uncooked sheep meat or offal. 🐾



Photo: Mick Davis

Feral cats pose a significant health threat to the Tasmanian sheep flock as a host of sarco and other infectious diseases.

Cat control options

From 1 July 2012, under the *Cat Management Act 2009*, land owners and managers can take action to protect wildlife and livestock on their land. Under the Act, cats found in a prohibited, rural or remote area may be trapped and humanely destroyed or returned to their owners.

Primary producers and people working on their behalf may carry out these measures on rural land where livestock graze.

On other private land that is more than 1km from a place of residence, a person can trap, seize or humanely destroy a cat.

Be aware that cats from neighbouring territories will invade areas where a previous cat population has been removed — nature hates a vacuum.

It is important to maintain the control pressure and ideally coordinate with neighbours to keep cat populations low across as large an area as possible.

For more information, download the *Feral Cats in Tasmania* factsheet from the DPIPWWE invasive species web page:

www.dpipwe.tas.gov.au/invasivespecies

For further information:

Contact your veterinary practitioner

DPIPWE:

Bruce Jackson

P: (03) 6336 5306 M: 0407 872 520

Sue Martin

P: (03) 6336 5468 M: 0488 198 500

SheepConnect: www.tia.tas.edu.au/extensive/sheepconnect

