

Keeping Your Alpaca Healthy

I will not go into a lot of detail in this timeslot, but will focus on the basics of overall health and management of alpaca.

Obvious (yet not so obvious) essentials for health

- Food
- Water
- Shelter

Reasons these are not so obvious

Food

All alpacas need adequate nutrition, even though they are excellent converters. Alpacas that are under more “stress” – not literally stressed as we would consider ourselves stressed, but metabolic stress: especially growing animals (especially once weaned – 18mths old), and females that are mid to late pregnant or lactating. These animals are producing – milk, babies, growth: and need extra nutrients to produce these things adequately.

There will be more on nutrition in a later talk today.

Water

CLEAN FRESH water is essential at all times. Water troughs or containers should be cleaned regularly especially where contamination is a problem and in hot weather to prevent algae and mosses building up, some of which can be harmful.

Ensure there is enough water for all animals in the paddock, ideally the water should be self filling but should be checked daily, because even self-filling systems can fail if holes or cracks occur.

Shelter

Especially in inclement weather: stormy, cold and windy: and for freshly shorn animals. Although alpacas are quite hardy in cold weather in full fleece, if they become very wet and it is windy they can suffer from exposure and hypothermia and this can be fatal.

Access to shelter should be available at all times if possible but especially for shorn animals for at least the first 4 weeks.

Alpacas tend to like open airy spaces rather than cramped or low areas which they may refuse to go in. A high roof and open front to a shed should be adequate. If the alpacas are in the shelter often, make sure the floor is cleaned out (common sense).

Other ways to assist with your alpacas' health

-Obtain experience with husbandry, handling and routine procedures

The more confident you are with handling and treating your alpaca the quicker, easier, and less stressful it will be.

-Learn from vets and experienced breeders. Ask questions and request to have a go at things: useful procedures are toenail trimming, checking gums and eyelid colour, giving injections and taking temperatures. This allows you to give routine medications, health check unwell animals before you speak to the vet, and give follow-up treatments the vet can leave with you.

- Observe your animals. Become used to their levels of activity, feeding habits, amount of time spent up and feeding and sitting down. You will then be more likely to pick up an off colour animal quickly by noticing a change in activity levels.
- Learn how to body score, and perform body scoring on your animals on a regular basis. Skinny alpacas are difficult to pick out in full fleece unless they are palpated/scored. You will then be quick to recognise if an alpaca is losing weight before you will be able to see it.
- Assist with birthing if needed, preferably under instruction from your vet or an experienced breeder.

Indicators of ill health in alpacas

- Slow or “lagging” behaviour
- Sitting down more often than usual or more often than other animals, may not be chewing cud when sitting down
- Off food
- Rolling or lying on side, uncomfortable looking
- Weight loss
- Diarrhoea
- Lameness
- Unusual gait or behaviour
- “Quidding”-holding food in the cheek
- Straining on poo piles without producing normal amounts of urine or faeces.

Often it can be difficult to tell on small properties if an animal is “lagging”- it is much easier if a mob runs for food to pick slow or lame animals at the back of a mob. It may be an idea to run your animals up a laneway into yards or call them to the opposite side of the paddock to observe their behaviour.

If an animal is lagging, examine it

-Check body score: 2.5/5 + is a healthy range. If less than this, the animal may be losing weight. Note: animals that are NORMALLY score 4.5/5 and are now 2.5/5 are obviously not healthy and are losing weight. This is why it is important to score your animals regularly.

Weigh animals regularly if you have the facility and time. Keep records. This will give you an accurate indication if animals are losing weight. This is particularly helpful for weanlings.

-Check colour of gums and inner eyelids. These should be a healthy pink. If they are pale pink, white, dark pink-red-brown or yellow-tinged, they are not normal.

-Check temperature. Normal temperature for an adult alpaca is 37.5-38.9°C

If your alpaca has a temperature over 39.5 degrees, (especially if 40+) initiate cooling methods, usually with cold water hosing. Hyperthermia can be fatal.

If the temperature is less than 37, warm your alpaca up: move it to a shed, put a heater on near the animal, place a coat on it.

Call the vet.

Lastly (but still important!) be prepared if a veterinarian is coming to your property by having the animal in an enclosed area, easy to catch, and be prepared to restrain the animal so the vet can examine it. Have any relevant records close at hand (age, pregnancy status/lactation status, previous health problems, last drenched, treatments etc).