

The Healthy Alpaca



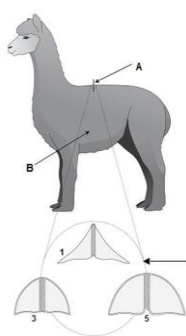
There are now over 40,000 alpacas in the UK, with some of them being lucky enough to reside within our client base! With that in mind we have produced this article to give you a quick overview on keeping alpacas and how to ensure they remain healthy.

FEED

Alpaca feed should be made up of mainly *forage*, such as grass and hay. Supplementary feed may be needed during times of higher energy expenditure, for example during pregnancy, lactation and the winter. *Camelid specific* concentrate feed should be used as this will contain the right balance of vitamins and minerals specifically for camelids, for example higher amounts of vitamin-D. Concentrates should be added to the diet *slowly*, over 5-10 days, to allow the rumen to adjust. A huge variety of plants are toxic to alpacas, including bracken fern and ragwort. Therefore ensure pasture is not contaminated with any plants that may be toxic – including fence perimeters due to their long necks!

BODY CONDITION SCORING (BCS)

Fat coverage can be assessed over the central backbone near the last ribs, by placing your fingers on the centre of the back, either side of the vertebrae and feeling for muscle coverage. It should feel firm, flat/slightly convex body shape. Bulging indicates fat coverage consistent with the animal being overweight, whilst a concave shape indicates that the animal is underweight.



An animal's ideal BCS varies slightly depending on age, sex and pregnancy but is around 3 for all alpacas. Alpacas often have very dense fibre that can mask their BCS, therefore it is important to assess their fat coverage via the method above regularly.

Alpacas also should be shorn annually, to help prevent blowfly strike and overheating in the hotter months of the year. The fibre can also be made into many different things once spun!

HOUSING

Alpacas are herd animals, so should be kept in groups of at least two, however, bigger groups are preferable. Ideally they should

be grouped based on sex, pregnancy status, age and weight. If animals get bullied, they must be removed and placed with a different group.

BREEDING

Females (Hembras) can be mated when they are 60% of their adult bodyweight, usually at around 14 months. Males are usually ready to breed from at around 2-3 years, however they can be fertile at a younger age. During mating the female sits in the "Cush" position and the male mounts from behind; they may sit like this for up to 45 minutes. If the female is not receptive, she will refuse to sit and will often spit at the males, this may be used as an indication of pregnancy from seven days post mating. Females are induced ovulators. The act of mating can damage the uterine lining therefore indiscriminate mating, especially when thought to be pregnant, should be avoided.

The average gestation is 345 days, however this can vary between 330-370 days. The cria should weigh between 6-9kg at birth and will be on its feet and nursing within 3 hours of birth. It is important for crias to suckle within the first 6 hours of life to ensure that they have sufficient colostrum. Mothers are protective over their young and typically wean their cria at 6 months. Females can be re-mated 2-6 weeks after giving birth.

COMMON CONDITIONS

Vitamin D deficiency is common in alpacas and all South American camelids, and can cause rickets. Vitamin D is made in the skin using UV light therefore (despite recent sunny spells!), alpacas often become deficient due to the difference in climate between here and South America. The effectiveness of oral Vitamin D paste has not been proven, whereas there is evidence that the injectable form prevents rickets and improves growth rates in crias and young alpacas.

PGE (parasitic gastroenteritis) or worms commonly cause disease in alpacas. High worm burdens can cause weight-loss, diarrhoea, lethargy, loss of appetite and anaemia. Faecal egg counts (FECs) can be used to assess individual or herd worm burdens and therefore influence decisions on when to use anthelmintics (wormers). Heavy burdens of one of the worms commonly seen, *Haemonchus contortus*, can cause severe anaemia (lack of red blood cells) which can be fatal. This can be evaluated by assessing mucous membrane colour which should be a pale pink colour but will become lighter with anaemia.

Claws can become overgrown easily and need regular trimming. The claw shouldn't be longer than the edge of the toe.

FAILURE OF PASSIVE TRANSFER – WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW!

Failure of Passive Transfer (FPT) is a major cause of neonatal mortality in camelids. FPT occurs when the neonate fails to receive an adequate amount of antibodies through colostrum. Colostrum, the first form of milk that is produced, contains immunoglobulin proteins (antibodies) that protect against disease. Crias do not receive these antibodies through the placenta during pregnancy, resulting in a naïve immune system at birth. It is crucial that crias receive an adequate amount of colostrum in the first 12-24 hours of life to set them up for a healthy start. FPT usually presents between 24 hours and seven days old. The treatment for FPT is a plasma transfusion given to the cria. In order to harvest plasma from your farm, a blood collection from another healthy alpaca is required. This blood is then spun, frozen and stored at the lab until required. If you would like more information on how to prepare for your unpacking season, please phone the practice on 01722 333291 and request to speak to Maggie.

ALPACA GLOSSARY

- **Unpacking** – when an alpaca gives birth
- **Cria** – a baby alpaca
- **Hembra** – a female alpaca
- **Macho** – a male alpaca
- **Cush** – posture alpacas take where they sit down with their legs folded underneath themselves
- **Orgle** – characteristic rapid grunting sound made by breeding males during copulation.
- **Tui** – a weanling alpaca less than a year old

If you have any questions regarding anything in this article or keeping alpacas please phone the practice on 01722 333291