



Farm Vet News

Fortnightly blog of Endell Farm Vets

Endell Vets Smallholder Team

11 June 2021

To Disbud or Not to Disbud?

Disbudding is one of the most common surgical procedures carried out in goats. Disbudding is considered a mutilation under the law of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, but is recognised as a procedure that can be carried out for non-therapeutic reasons.

Not all goats are disbudded. For example, many Pygmy and Boer goats are kept horned and Angora and Cashmere are never disbudded. Many goats kept on smallholdings and commercial (dairy) farms are routinely disbudded if your vets establish a legitimate reason for the procedure i.e. health and safety.

There are some hornless cattle breeds, which avoids disbudding altogether. This is not possible in goats. After World War II, the British Goat Society tried to encourage the breeding of polled goats. This led to an increase of intersex animals (where they show both male and female characteristics). An association was found between the polled and intersex genes, thus stopping the polled breeding.

We have to remind ourselves that, although kids are bright, alert and active animals soon after parturition, they are still neonates and great care must be taken.

Disbudding is a very different procedure to the technique used for disbudding calves. Goats are very sensitive to local anaesthetic and with even a small amount can reach toxic doses. In the UK, the disbudding and dehorning of goats is considered veterinary surgery and can only be undertaken by a veterinary surgeon. Disbudding should be carried out with minimal pain and suffering and should include anaesthesia.

Goats are considered to be 'food-producing species'. There is no legal provision for 'pet' goats, therefore the legislation for drug use/withdrawals should be according to food producing animals regardless of how they are kept (pet versus consumption). Few drugs are specifically licensed for goats, therefore medicines used are cascaded through licensed use for other food producing species. A discussion should be had with your vet regarding meat/milk withholds.



Reasons to disbud

Horns can protect goats from predators, help with thermoregulation and help establish dominance within the herd's hierarchy. The dominance aspect is usually where problems arise, especially when kept in close confinement. Horned goats know how to use their horns and will undoubtedly do so. Common injuries include damage to udders, eyes and eyelids.

Goats are friendly animals by nature, which leads to close human contact and therefore accidental injuries. Common scenarios include horns accidentally catching body parts while milking or when handling. Children's faces and eyes are at a higher risk as they may stand at the same level as horns. The

RSPCA recommends that novice owners and owners with children helping care for them keep hornless, rather than horned goats, as they can be easier and safer to handle.

Disbudding can also prevent goats from self-trauma. Goat horns tend to grow backwards, which allows for their head to get into small spaces but not out. While displaying their natural browsing behavior, they can easily get horns stuck in hedges and fences.

Horns can become ingrown which can be very uncomfortable for animals and may require a much more invasive procedure as an adult goat.

Disbudding kids does not alter their behaviour, but may make them less aggressive towards other goats. They will still fight for a place in the pecking order and are at a huge disadvantage to a goat with horns. Horned goats should never be kept with hornless goats.

Age at disbudding

It is recommended to disbud kids between two and seven days of age. Males' buds tend to grow at a faster rate than females. At this age, the buds are small enough to remove completely. If older, the buds are larger and are at a higher risk of leaving some bud behind which will create 'scurs' later in life. Disbudding at an older age is stressful for both the animal and the vet, with a common occurrence of regrowth.

Possible adverse outcomes of disbudding

- Regrowth of horns resulting in scurs
- Prolonged recovery time
- Meningoencephalitis
- Convulsions/seizures
- Fractured skulls
- Death/anaesthetic losses

How to keep disbudding safe and successful

- Short time away from mother
- Short time under sedation
- Weighing kids for correct anaesthetic dose
- Very hot disbudding iron with short applications
- Correct age/small bud size
- Off license anti-inflammatory drug
- Provision of warm, dry environment before, during and after procedure

SUMMARY

Disbudding is a common procedure, but is not a task that should be undertaken lightly. The decision to disbud needs to be made carefully by your vet with a clear reason why this procedure is needed. Complications can occur, but there are many actions our vets take to avoid such problems. It is better to make a plan ahead of time rather than decide during a busy kidding season. If you would like to discuss disbudding please do not hesitate to contact one of our vets to discuss it in further detail.