

Alpaca Health Care

Proper Weight

The first area of health care is proper weight and with alpacas it's not always easy to tell their weight by a visual inspection. Also, as with any animal, weight will vary with size and bone structure; this is why many alpaca farms or ranches use body scoring. It is a good practice to do this regularly or once you know your alpaca's weight to weigh them regularly. Sudden changes in body weight can indicate a problem early on. Alpacas are scored from 1 to 5, with a score of 1 being dangerously thin and a score of 5 being obese. Scores of 2.5 to 3.5 indicate good health with the exception of those, less than 15 months (crias) and pregnant females, in which case 3 to 3.5 is a better score. [Click here to learn how to body score an alpaca.](#)

You need to get into a habit of checking your alpaca's weight, often so you can adjust their grain supplements accordingly. Dangerously thin alpacas need supplements and good pasture grazing (remember, a score of 1 means your alpaca is dangerously thin. Don't immediate action is required which probably include, calling your vet). While obese alpacas (a score of 5) often don't need any grains and can subsist on good quality hay and grass and exercise.

As with any herd animal, alpacas will determine which alpaca is stronger than the other (in other words a pecking order). With this in mind it's a good idea to separate your herds into feeding groups, to prevent the stronger alpacas from getting fat and the weaker ones getting skinny. In some cases, this may include singling out one alpaca (the skinny or weak one) and actually feeding it by itself to help it get back to the proper weight. You may have to isolate or rotate companions of those who are difficult to deal with and even exercise those that are overweight by leading them on a halter or putting the water away from their grazing or feeding area.

Assessing Your Alpacas

Alpacas can be hard to determine their current health condition, because they tend to be stoic (show patience and endurance during adversity) and you may have a sick alpaca and not know it until it gets more serious. Obviously, getting to know your alpaca's regular routine will help to determine if your alpacas are not feeling or acting normally. Like hanging around the rest of the herd, getting food, visiting the dung pile, going on alert when sense a danger or threat. Here are a few signs to look for:

- separating themselves from the herd
- limping or staggering (walking strangely)
- bad alpaca posture
- ears moving separately from each other (could be ear mites)
- shallow or labored breathing instead of regular comfortable breathing with relaxed nostrils
- protruding teeth
- eyes that are not bright, clear or look irritated
- abrasions on the body (continually rubbing themselves against the fence, posts or barn)
- abrasions on the pads of the feet or toenails that need to be clipped
- matted fiber around the hindquarters (this can indicate diarrhea)
- a normally active alpaca cushing a lot
- excessively rolling (possible colic)
- not grazing , eating hay or grain supplements
- unable to cush

Most of the signs above dictate that you need to investigate the problem further, at minimum with an experienced breeder, but also possibly with a vet. (Whenever you are in doubt it is always best to err on the side of caution and seek out a veterinarian.)

Immediate attention is required if your alpaca is twitching, bleeding or experiencing labored breathing, extreme lethargy or severe diarrhea.

It's crucially important to get to know your alpaca's droppings, a vet or an experienced alpaca breeder can show you what you need to be aware of when inspecting your animals' droppings. Changes in your alpaca's droppings can signal you that a parasite or disease has begun affecting your herd.

Worms/Parasites

Alpacas can get worms or parasites, when grazing near other animals (sheep, deer etc.) or near dung piles. The common two are Meningeal worm ([Click here form more information on Meningeal worm](#)), if you live in an area with white tail deer and Coccidiosis an intestinal parasite ([Click here form more information on Coccidiosis](#)). As with all livestock, the vaccination schedules and worming treatments depend on where you live. Each part of the country has its own unique parasite problems and prevalence of disease. We recommend examining the most susceptible animals in the herd first (those ages 3 months to 9 months old). If there is no problem here it is unlikely in the rest of the herd.

There are a couple of practices that you may choose here.

The first is the more common method, that of doing a routine worming with Ivermectin and Panacur and keeping good records.

The second method is to try to prevent your alpacas (or the worms) from building up immunity to products like with Ivermectin and Panacur. To do this requires a microscope and centrifuge and some training or sending in several of your alpacas' fecal samples to have testing done. You don't have to test every alpaca's fecal sample but you want to get a few different alpaca's fecal in each group (ex. holding, quarantine, males or females pens), if no worms are found you don't need to do anything, if worms are found then treat all alpacas from that area and retest the other alpaca pens, especially those pens or grazing areas nearby the infected area.

Diseases

Most alpaca farmers or ranchers will tend to give their own alpacas' vaccinations. Certain diseases may not have vaccinations approved for use in alpacas, all this means is that the vaccination has not been tested on alpacas and they don't know if it will be effective or have side effects on alpacas. Talk to your vet (who is familiar with alpacas to advise you what to use and what to look for.)

It is always best to be prepared for anaphylactic reactions with any shot you give by keeping epinephrine available at all times and watch your animals very closely.

Infectious Alpaca Diseases

- Bovine Viral Diarrhea Virus (BVDV) - Causes persistent infections and abortions. [Click here form more information on Bovine Viral Diarrhea Virus \(BVDV\)](#).
- Mycoplasma haemolama/Eperythrozoonosis (EPE) –Can lead to severe anemia or mild to moderate anemia particularly in animals that are stressed or immune compromised. [Click here for more information on Mycoplasma haemolama/Eperythrozoonosis \(EPE\)](#).
- West Nile Virus has been found in alpacas and has been fatal. Be sure to keep the mosquito population down. Your vet will know if this is a problem in your area and if you need to vaccinate for it.
- Rabies is a viral disease that affects the brain and is spread by the bite of an animal infected with rabies. Your vet will know if this is a problem in your area and if you need to vaccinate for it.
- Foot and Mouth Disease - a highly contagious viral disease in cattle, sheep, swine, and goats. It doesn't appear that it is as contagious in alpacas. There were reports about alpaca herds being destroyed in England during the FMD outbreak years ago. So if your alpacas are in an outbreak area, they will probably be destroyed.

Other Alpaca Health Issues

- Dental issues – an abscess appears like an alpaca has a swelling their cheek. On males you need to check for fighting teeth and then proper teeth care.
- Foot problems can be avoided by regular toenail trimming. If the toenails are curling outward or inward, you have waited too long to trim them. Just exercise care because alpacas have a quick that supplies blood to the nail that you can cut too close to.
- Heat stress due to their heavy fleece in warm weather. To prevent this shear them in the spring, provide a cool shelter or by spraying them with water on the underbelly and chest (do not spray their back or top side) or by getting the ground wet for them to lie down in and get cool.
- Cold stress in colder climate areas. To prevent this provide a shelter from the wind, use water heaters in drinking water to prevent water freezing. Breed your alpacas for delivering crias in warm weather months. If not plan on being present during cold weather months and having coats for newly born crias.
- Vitamin supplementation in areas where the soil may be Selenium deficient, you may also need to feed additional minerals and supplements to keep your alpacas healthy.