

TIPS ON HANDLING EVERYDAY ALPACA CARE

It's always so exciting to start your own alpaca farm. Bringing those first few alpacas home and beginning to care for them now brings on a new responsibility and many challenges at times. I remember when we only had 3 or 4 alpacas. Everything seemed so much easier back then. A cria was born, we didn't see it happen, and it just got up and nursed. Wow, it was so easy we thought. Today, 75 plus alpacas later, we have experienced and learned so much about our herd and would like to share with you some of what we have learned to be some of the key areas to good herd management.

1. Observation – the number one key to finding and properly treating a problem.

- Every morning look at your alpacas. One of the best times to do this is when you are feeding. Does every alpaca go right to the feeder? Are they staying cushed at this time? Are their eyes runny or are they sneezing a lot? Are certain alpaca tending to eat most of the grain so that others cannot?
- If it's nearing the time when one of your females is going to criate, see if she's lying down a lot, if her teats are full and if she tends to want to keep going back to the poop pile. Also, if she not eating very much or she's really making a lot of her "humming" sounds these symptoms could indicate labor and the impending birth.

2. Planning – be prepared to handle a problem.

- Make sure you have on hand at the farm the tools needed to treat the problem especially if your Veterinarian does not live closely. We have antibiotics on hand along with several other medications if the need exists. All we have to do then is to call our Vet and follow his/her instructions.
- Also, you'd be surprised how often a digital thermometer comes in handy besides its use with newborn crias.
- Keep an "OB Kit" stocked and ready to be used with those newborns, especially when they're born outside in a pasture. Keep old sheets and towels ready for this use. (Remember, don't put any fabric softener in your laundry if reusing these sheets or towels. A Dam could ignore her cria if the cria has a new scent not his own.)
- Learn to do your alpaca's fecal testing! It's essential to proper worming.
- Buy a scale. A cria scale is fine but for continued use of worming and other medications, especially those specific to weight, a scales a must. Weight is also a great indicator of how well an alpaca is doing overall.

Prevention – You know how the saying goes, "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." How true!

- Clean Pastures!!! Don't be fooled that just clean pastures will rid you of worm/ parasite issues. You must clean your pastures daily, along with the barn and runways. You must be on a strict worming schedule specific to that area you live in. You must do fecal testing regularly. You must rotate your pastures every 5-7 days giving your alpaca a new clean pasture. You must reduce the numbers of alpacas in your pasture to 6 per acre. I can't stress the importance of this.
- Worming – please remember just worming medication alone will not fight parasites. Remember that your alpaca is still shedding parasites for 3 days after the wormer is given. It is wise to quarantine the alpaca with hay feeders off the ground for those 3 days. Otherwise, the alpaca are shedding those parasites right back onto the grass. If you find that your crias are having more diarrhea than in previous years then you probably should review your parasite control program.
- Hay and grain – make sure your hay and grain are free from mold and that your hay is free of other "slobber toxins" such as thistle, horse nettle, etc...
- Safety – make sure you check gates, loose end wires on fencing and electric.
- Neckbands – keep them as close to the neck as possible. I have heard breeders say that cria have gotten entangled in their Dams neckband and have been strangled. Neckbands have been known to catch on bolted ends of hay feeders . There have been reports of hay bin-dragging alpaca going into labor.
- Waterers – wash buckets daily and those pans inside heated waterers.
- Feedings bins - should be kept clean and free of bird droppings, etc... Clean them at least weekly.
- Cria coats – use them with discretion. It may be 50 or 60 degrees but regardless a cria may feel the effects of damp weather more than you know. The next thing you'll see is a sneezing, coughing and runny-nosed cria.

- Pasture/Ground cracks – fill all holes and large cracks big enough for an alpaca to get a fetlock or leg caught in and perhaps broken. This happens especially with drought-like conditions, heavy rains and often is seen after the new fence has been put in and the fence laborers have drilled the wrong posthole.
- Water bucket placement – watch where you put your buckets! Too close to the ground and you’ve just given that water-loving alpaca a reason to cool off its legs. The water has just become contaminated. If you don’t secure a bucket handle then you may have an alpaca running around with a new headdress – the bucket!
- Heat – be aware of how heat can affect an alpaca. Try to keep areas for them to cool off either in a barn with fans or under trees (not poisonous) or sheds. Crias are especially sensitive to heat stress if not sheared or if they have a sun-loving Dam. In the summer, I tend to bring my crias in by 10am and let them back out when much cooler in the afternoon
- Organization - Inoculations, Breeding Schedules, Supplies – Keep good records! Also, put up some dry-erase boards in your treatment room or barn. Use one for Treatments being given, another for Inoculations due, one for Breeding Schedules and yet another for Supplies that need to be ordered. Keeping organized will keep you from forgetting to give a medication or ordering that supply that will be needed in an emergency.
- Gates – do your last walk of the day to check gates. You wouldn’t want your males getting into a female group nor would you want them getting out of pasture and going toward the road in a pack.
- Transportation – If you transport your alpaca yourself, make sure your trailer is properly equipped with hay and water. Watch those extra hay bag straps. Make sure they’re in back of the bag or you may have alpaca wearing a new necklace by the end of the trip.
(I love using those bags of cardboard for bedding my trailer, van and maternity stall. They’re so much cleaner.) Speaking of vans and trailers, make sure you have built a ramp for your alpaca to egress from the back or you’ll need a strong “hulk-type” to get the alpaca out of the vehicle so as not to get a leg caught or broken in this endeavor.
- Hired Transports – make the transport a success. Find out how your transporter keeps his trailer. That is, does he have AC with venting? How often does she stop to check the alpaca and refresh the water and hay? How often is the trailer cleaned and how is it cleaned after or before the next use? (I prefer to hear that some Clorox solution is used between trips.) What does the transporter require of each alpaca with regard to health exams and testing? Does the farm have to give fecal results or deworm just prior to a transport? Does the transporter carry medication or a birthing kit? Have you given the transporter your telephone and cell numbers in case of an emergency? How long will the trip take? (You want it to be the shortest time possible.) Also, Microchip and neckband your alpaca. (I find those Velcro legs bands that are very thin are the best. You can put 2 together for an adult and then permanent mark them with the alpaca’s name. They stay on very well. Lastly, do your part to give the Transporter all the necessary documentation you have. Can you imagine if your transporter broke down and your alpaca had to be kept on another farm for a few days? Who would know which alpaca it was or what the alpaca’s medical history might be?
- Think ahead of the problem! Imagine what could happen and try to prevent it. I know that time and experience gives a breeder more of an idea of problem-solving issues. With over 80 alpaca and 7 years of experience, you can see what insight has been given to us!

Please, don’t hesitate to call and ask an experienced, fellow breeder about how he or she handles certain situations. They along with your alpaca Veterinarian can be your best resource!

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