

Eighteen Important Items

Caroline Mixon – Carodel Alpacas, Flowery Branch, Georgia

- 1. Don't buy babies younger than 4 or 5 months** Unweaned crias (baby alpacas) are not suitable pets. If you have inadvertently obtained one, bottle feed it 20 percent of its weight daily with plain homogenized Vitamin D milk (reinforced with nutrients if it doesn't gain daily) and don't cuddle it. Offer it a coarse sweet feed and free choice quality hay at an early age. It will start to nibble when it is ready. Naturally raised crias, not normally weaned until six months, should gain a half pound daily. Provide it with another animal for company - preferably an alpaca - but keep physical human contact to a minimum. An adult alpaca bonded to a human from near-birth without proper herd socialization can be a danger when the animal treats the human as another alpaca. Seek information from knowledgeable reputable breeders or veterinarians. A reputable breeder will not sell you a cria under four or five months of age.
- 2. Alpacas left haltered are in peril**
Because many owners don't train their animals to haltering, or provide a catch pen or stall for doing so; they leave the halters on all the time. This results in abscesses, ulcers, unsightly calluses....and, if the halter is caught on something, a broken neck. And because haltering has not been mastered, some owners leave the SAME halter on a growing animal. Some have been found with the flesh growing around the noseband or with malformation of the nasal passages.
- 3. Alpacas should not be tied to trees or posts**
Don't leave your alpaca unattended tied to any un-giving object. Some have tried to accustom their animals to a halter by leaving them tied to a tree. The too-often result has been a broken neck when they have tossed their heads to break free. Use a bungee or other elastic extension, firmly secured, if you must tie an untended alpaca.
- 4. Deworming and vaccination.**
Alpacas need to be on a regular schedule of deworming. Panacur or Safeguard paste and Ivermectin (Ivomec or Dectomax) subcutaneous injections have been the recommended dewormers. Ivermectin, given at 1 cc/75 lbs. of body weight each month is used for prevention of meningeal worm. Ivermectin will not take care of tapeworms - use Panacur or Safeguard paste, alternately at least quarterly. Check by fecal flotation every 60 days or so to see if your program is working.. Yearly vaccinations (CDT and killed rabies vaccine) are standard. Babies are vaccinated at birth and before weaning at five to six months. Young

animals are more susceptible to coccidia infestations than older ones; diarrhea is a symptom. Coccidiosis presents a danger of dehydration as well as debilitation that can lead to death. Treat with Corrid.

5. Alpacas frequently choke on concentrated pellets.

Not every one of them will choke, but if you feed straight pellets to your alpacas, ultimately you are likely to have a case of choke - particularly when animals are in competition for food. A coarse feed, even mixed with pellets, is preferable. In an emergency, acute episodes of choke may be resolved by passing a tube into the side of the mouth and gently feeding the length of it down the throat to clear obstruction. Examination by vet should follow any emergency treatment and an antibiotic administered to ward off pneumonia in the event partially masticated pellets are sucked into the lungs. Some have successfully massaged the "lump" loose. However, if the airways are totally closed, time is short. Check with your vet and have a first aid plan as a contingency. Death from asphyxiation from spectacular clogging of their airways by saliva-swollen pellets can occur.

6. If you do feed pellets

To discourage choke, spread pellets in a wide pan or put large smooth rocks in their bowl so they must "lip" around them. This will keep them from gobbling too fast. Non-breeding alpacas fare very well on free choice hay, adequate pasture, fresh water and free choice loose minerals. If they are breeding, underweight or lactating, supplement them with a feed formulated for alpacas. Goat or cow formulated feed can be used - even horse feed has been used. They CANNOT be fed rabbit pellets even though the pellets may look like other pelleted feeds.

7. They need a source of minerals/salt

Whether or not you feed grain or pellets, do be sure they have free access to a source of salt and minerals--including extra selenium if you are in a selenium-deficient area. Check with your Extension Agent to learn the selenium level in your state or county. Your agent can take a core sample of your hay to assess its nutritional content.

8. Heat and Humidity

Alpacas, who originally came from the dry thin air of the South American altiplano, need particular management when heat coupled with high humidity are present. They need to be sheared in the spring and cooled by hosing their bellies and under their tails when the heat is oppressive. They must have shelter from direct sun and some kind of air movement if their shelter enclosed.

9. Open-mouthed breathing can be dire

In the heat of summer, never ignore an animal that is breathing with an

open mouth. While they will do this if they were recently spat upon, it is an extremely abnormal way to breathe. Conclude that they are in heat stress and cool them IMMEDIATELY and thoroughly. Males in heat stress will have swollen testicles. A normal adult temperature is 100 to 101 degrees....sometimes 102 can be normal for your animal. Body temperature of 103 degrees F. and higher is trouble.

10. Poison plants and trees

Alpacas are browsers - they like to eat a variety of things. A number of those things can be lethal: Rhododendron and wilted cherry are among the most well known examples of vegetation that have proved lethal. There is a list available of toxic plants and trees - check with any one of the associations devoted to camelids, or your Extension Agent - who is a good resource and whose services are paid for with your taxes....use him!

11. Alpacas don't like to be alone

Even responsible purchasers, who have listened to responsible owners and bought a pair of alpacas, can run into trouble. As long as the two are together....they are content. If you choose to take one of them for a walk, expect the one remaining to become extremely agitated. So agitated that he may jump the fence or do damage to himself in an attempt to join you. Even in herd situations, alpacas show concern when one is separated from the group.

12. Shelter - Fencing

Many alpacas live without any shelter but trees. It can be done, but it isn't an ideal situation. Some protection from wind, snow, rain, sun and lightning should be afforded them. Fencing for any kind of livestock of similar size should be adequate. Barbed wire is a poor choice since they rub against fences and poke their heads through the wires and the barbs can easily injure their prominent eyes, or rip into their skin. No-Climb fencing aids in protecting the alpaca from predators. They usually do not challenge their fence unless it is a male showing his prowess or a distressed alpaca during weaning.

13. Males close to one year of age should not reside with females

Young females should not reside with males--young or old. Since most are sexually precocious and fertile, it is not uncommon for pregnancies to occur in females at four months. By six months, a young male is sufficiently practiced that he can encourage adult females to ovulate--and some may even be capable of penetrating a female. If you have a brother and sister together, don't rely on them to understand the taboos of incest. When animals are in unnatural confinement nature doesn't require them to recognize the finer distinctions of family trees. In the wild, some natural mechanisms mitigate against this.

14. Trim males' fighting teeth

By the age of at least two, impressive, curved and very sharp upper and lower fighting teeth will have matured to a point where serious damage can be done to other males--and to an uncooperative female. And, if you leave breeding males together, expect injury or heat stress. Even in 100-degree weather a male will chase a rival till he drops. One enraged male can render another emasculated with his front teeth. A full set of fighting teeth isn't necessary to inflict great and lasting damage. Consult veterinarian about removing tips of fighting teeth.

15. You may need a chute or some safe restraint

Trying to cut toenails, (and, yes, toenails need to be cut or lameness will result--although some animals rarely or never need trimming) or administer shots, or handle an injured animal can be dangerous for the animal and you unless you have a reliable, SAFE restraint.

16. Prolonged labor is not natural

Once hard labor has begun (active pushing), a nose or a foot should appear within an hour (preferably sooner). Don't let an animal struggle for hours without producing anything. If, prior to actively pushing, she lies down on one side and then the other frequently, - or up and down constantly - or if she is flat out with her head on the side, call your vet. If you don't have a vet you can call, learn what is, and how to resolve a dystocia (difficult birth) before you have to.

17. Keep colostrum and plasma on hand

Some new mom's won't have milk or it will be slow to come in. Some new crias are weak. Colostrum (first milk) needs to be in a baby's belly within 12 hours after birth to help insure a passive transfer of antibodies, and to give the baby strength. Don't wait until you have a problem. Have at least a quart, preferably a gallon, (frozen in six- or eight-ounce freezer baggies or containers) of goat or cow colostrum (from animals that have been vaccinated) on hand - along with a nipple that works (recommended is a flutter valve available from Caprine Supply - 1-(800-646-7736) and a soda bottle that fits the nipple. There is nothing sadder than an owner calling around to distant alpaca neighbor at midnight in search of life-saving colostrum. Keep two units of plasma in your freezer along with the colostrum. Deep frozen, it will last a long time. (Triple J)

18. Don't keep 'stuff' in their pens

Alpacas are curious. They explore everything. Don't leave potentially dangerous lumber, wire, wheelbarrows, baling string, tractor parts or brooms and shovels where they can reach them, get tangled in them, or chew on them.