



A Guide to Health Problems of **ALPACAS**

Alpacas are wonderful animals to care for, whether we are commercially farming them, or just have a few of these gentle, easy animals on our lifestyle property.

Good pasture, supplemental forage, toe nail and teeth trimming when necessary, annual shearing, appropriate worm treatment, and suitable companions will help to keep them in good condition; however it is important to be aware of the common health problems encountered by alpacas in New Zealand.

To monitor your Alpaca's health, please follow the Six-Point Alpaca health checklist.

Apppearance

- Eyes and mucous membranes
- Skin and fleece
- Teeth, nails and posture

Locomotion

- Steady/normal gait

- Lameness, ataxia (wobbliness) or recumbancy

Poo

- Volume and consistency
- Diarrhoea +/- blood, straining
- Absent faeces

Appetite

- Normal
- Reduced or absent
- Excessive

Condition

- Body Condition Score
- Over or underweight
- Weight loss or gain

Attitude

- Bright, Alert and Responsive
- Depressed, lethargic or moribund
- Nervous

If you encounter any abnormalities during your alpaca check, please call the vet clinic to arrange a farm visit or discuss your finding with a vet.

ALPACA HEALTH PROBLEMS

Here are some of the most common health problems in Alpacas:

STOMACH ULCERS

The exact reasons for ulcers developing is currently unknown but are often associated with high stocking rates, stress and long term use of non-steroidal anti-inflammatories such as Metacam or Ketoprofen.

Ulcers can have serious consequences ranging from blood loss to peritonitis after an ulcer has eroded and perforated the stomach wall.

Clinical signs include lethargy and weakness, pale gums, black faeces or diarrhoea. Affected animals can be found collapsed and require immediate veterinary attention, or they may also be found dead.

BARBER'S POLE WORM (HAEMONCHUS)

Haemonchus is one of the many worms affecting Alpacas and can also cause problems in sheep, goats and cattle.

This worm sucks the blood of the host animal leading to weakness and lethargy, pale gums, diarrhoea, weight loss and colic. Affected animals can deteriorate quickly and the condition can appear very similar to stomach ulcers. Immediate veterinary attention is crucial.

A faecal egg count (FEC) can be done to confirm the diagnosis.

Treatment requires drenching the animal as soon as possible. For appropriate products and dosages please contact the clinic. A blood transfusion may be indicated with severe blood loss.

RYEGRASS STAGGERS

Caused by the endophyte fungus *Acremonium lolii* which is found in the leaf sheath of perennial ryegrass pastures, this disease can occur in mid-late summer and autumn, especially after a drought when new grass is growing fast with rainy weather. The fungus produces several mycotoxins that cause neurological signs in Alpacas and other grazing species.

The disease usually starts with a mild head tremor and animals often appear normal until they are excited or agitated. Signs progress to head shaking, wobbliness and recumbence.

A high stepping gait and stiffness can lead to complete loss of limb control and in severe cases paddling of the limbs and a star-gazing

expression in the neck can occur, often mistaken for tetanus.

Once removed from the affected pasture, most animals will recover with no apparent residual effects.

Remove affected animals from the pasture straight away and offer hay from a known endophyte free source like lucerne hay, and avoid stressing affected animals as this can lead to worsening of the condition.

Recovery times vary but are usually between one and three weeks.

There are natural products like "Mycosorb" available that may help in recovery but there is no data at present to support these.

RICKETS

Rickets is caused by an absolute deficiency of Vitamin D in young growing animals and can develop in cria from 4-7 months old up to 2 years old. Vitamin D is needed to build and maintain strong and healthy bone. As sunlight is needed to produce precursors to Vitamin D animals deprived of sunlight or kept inside, often due to prolonged bad weather, are prone to developing rickets.

You may notice a hunched stance, reluctance to run and play and lying down more often. Lameness, swollen joints and in some cases angular limb deformities may also be present. Animals may be depressed, ill-thrifty and losing weight.

A low serum Vitamin D level, along with recent weather patterns and age of the affected animal is used for diagnosis. In severe cases euthanasia may be indicated, otherwise treatment needs to be given with caution and as instructed by a vet as overdoses of Vitamin D can be toxic.

To prevent this condition, Vitamin D can be given orally or by injection every two weeks during winter or periods of bad weather. However, overzealous therapy can lead to calcification of ligaments, tendons, heart muscle, kidneys and blood vessels, and subsequently cause severe health problems.

Once a cria is consuming well-cured hay and is exposed to adequate sunlight, risks of developing rickets are minimal.

FACIAL ECZEMA

Please see the *Guide to Health Problems of Cattle* or *Guide to Health Problems of Sheep & Goats* brochures for more information on Facial Eczema (FE). However, please note that Alpacas are affected by FE but are not suitable for long acting intra-ruminal boluses. Use zinc oxide feed additives or zinc sulphate in the water instead.

TOXICITIES

Plants that are toxic to other stock are also toxic to alpacas. Ensure alpacas have no access to rhododendrons, azalea and oleander, trees such as yew and ngaio, plants such as foxglove and lilies, and weeds such as ragwort and nightshades. It is important to become familiar with all plants that may pose a risk, and the list is extensive. If in doubt, please consult your veterinarian.

Levin & Horowhenua Vets offer farm visits for assessment and treatment of sick alpacas, unpacking assistance and routine visits for drenching, feet trimming and vaccinating your stock.

