

THE HEALTHY GOAT

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INTRODUCTION:

Goats are ruminants like sheep and cattle, and as such share many of the health problems common to ruminants in the UK. One factor sets them apart from other ruminants however in that they have evolved as BROWSING and not GRAZING animals, and if given the opportunity they will seek out a varied diet including hedgerow, leaves and bark on trees, weeds, shrubs etc – and not solely grass. This is important when considering keeping a goat, and has also resulted in a number of subtle health issues that the goat owner must be familiar with, and these will be explored in this series of bulletins.



Goats are browsing animals – you won't see cattle and sheep in trees!

A HEALTHY GOAT:

There are two fundamental skills that a goat owner must develop, firstly an ability to recognise any physical changes and secondly any behavioural changes that may develop when a goat is unwell. It follows therefore that to recognise the abnormal – a skilled goat owner should get to know their goats well, and recognise that even within a group kept together – there will be individual variation.

A healthy goat should be bright, alert, inquisitive and interested in its surroundings. The coat should be shiny, the eyes bright and nostrils clean. If you have a thermometer take your goats temperature – as a guide, the “normal” range is 38.6°C to 40.6°C (102 – 104°F)– average 39.3°C.

SIGNS OF ILL-HEALTH:

Physical signs that things may be wrong include diarrhoea, a persistent cough, sudden weight loss, any nervous signs, going off feed etc. – and/or a rise in temperature. Refusing feed or a gradual reduction in daily feed intake may be early signs that something is wrong, and as a browsing animal, they may begin to seek out and eat plants that they would not normally eat such as ivy leaves.

On the whole, goats are not very vocal animals, if they do begin to make a noise, then they may simply be hungry and will stop when they are fed. It is important to point out to a novice keeper that does can be very vocal when on heat – and this can be mistaken for pain / discomfort. However an increasing bleating or crying which is totally out of character may be a sign that something is wrong. As the degree of discomfort increases, the volume may get louder, but as the condition worsens, the volume and intensity may decrease and this is never a good sign.

YOUR RESPONSIBILITIES AS A GOAT OWNER:

It is important to remember that your goat, regardless of whether you are keeping it as a pet or you're farming it for profit, is designated as a “farm animal” within UK legislation, and as such it must be registered with the local Defra animal health and veterinary laboratories agency (AHVLA) office. You will be issued with a holding (CPHH) number, and your goats must be identified with a visible ear tag or other accepted form of identification.

The Animal Welfare Act 2006 is an important piece of legislation; this makes owners and keepers legally responsible for ensuring that the welfare needs of kept animals including goats are met, essentially by good husbandry and management. These needs are summarised below, and are then expanded on with examples specific and relevant to goats and goat keepers, through the remainder of this article:

1. The need for a suitable environment.
2. The need for a suitable diet.
3. The need to exhibit normal behaviour patterns.
4. The need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals (as applicable).
5. The need to be protected from pain, injury, suffering and disease.



Ensure that the goat environment is enhanced (1) – they like things to clamber on and hide inside.

The need for a suitable environment:

Buildings must be well ventilated, but not too cold, draughty or dusty. There must be plenty of natural light, but it is also a requirement during the hours of darkness that artificial light must be available to enable goats to be inspected at all times (e.g. when ill or kidding). There must be sufficient space to move around in, with a minimum of 1.75 sq metres / goat, and there must be a dry bed to lie down on. There should also be good access to food and water at all times.

Buildings should be “goat proof,” bearing in mind that goats will investigate and chew fixtures and fittings with their mouth, can potentially open many gate and door catches, and are capable of reaching up to 2 metres above the ground on their hind legs – take care with the location of electrical and light fittings in particular!

When outdoors, again fencing and gates must be goat proof, remember they are potential escapologists! They do not like getting wet, so shelter and a dry lying area must be provided, together with ready access to clean fresh drinking water. Where possible allow them to “browse” with access to hedges and trees, but be familiar with those plants and trees that are potentially harmful such as Yew, Rhododendron and Pieris.



Goats are great escapists – buildings and fences must be goat proof.

The need for a suitable diet:



Care when feeding a coarse mix with limited feeder space, feeding pellets over-rides the goats natural selectivity.

As ruminants, more than 60% of their daily ration should be made up forage, this may be hay, straw, pea straw or silage depending on how they are kept, bearing in mind that some forages are better quality nutritionally than others and may need additional supplementation. Large commercial units may feed a TMR (total mixed ration) based on maize and grass silage with protein and energy balancers. The forage needs to be balanced nutritionally with either a commercial compound such as pellets or a coarse mix, or cereal grain such as oats, wheat or barley can be fed (although great care must be taken to introduce cereal grains gradually and not to overfeed). If you are feeding a group of goats a coarse mix, it is important to ensure that they can all feed together, otherwise the dominant goats that feed first will select the best bits – leaving poorer quality feed for the shy feeders. Feeding pellets overcomes this selectivity. The basic recommendation is that a goat should receive no more than 1.0% total body weight of compound / day for maintenance, a gradual increase will be required for late pregnancy and heavy lactation demands. Care with tit-bits – do not let your goat get too fat!!



Don't let your goat become obese!

The need to develop normal behaviour patterns:



Ensure that the goat environment is enhanced (2) – they like things to clamber on and hide inside.

The importance of allowing goats to follow their normal browsing behaviour has already been mentioned. They are friendly gregarious animals that genuinely enjoy the company of each other and of human company – do not place goats in isolation away from the sight and sound of other goats. Environmental enrichment is important, particularly when housed, places to climb onto such as straw bales and hiding places should be provided wherever possible.



Ensure that the goat environment is enhanced (3) – they like things to clamber on and hide inside.

The need to be housed with or apart from other animals:

A sick goat for example needs to be moved somewhere where it is not knocked around by fitter stronger goats and does not have to compete for feed when it is feeling unwell. Elderly goats and does due to kid also need this special attention – but as already stated, – do not place them in solitary confinement away from the sight and sound of others!

The need to be protected from pain injury and disease:

This will be considered in more detail in accompanying bulletins in this series.

FURTHER INFORMATION:

Goat Health and Welfare a Veterinary Guide (Crowood Press) – David Harwood MRCVS.

British Goat Society website: <http://www.allgoats.com>

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