

Goat Herd Health Planning

Goats are fabulously interesting animals full of curiosity and character such that the number of goats being kept within the UK continues to rise and not just on the large commercial intensive dairy units. Goats being a small ruminant, are often thought of as just like a sheep or even a small dairy cow, but in truth the Goat is quite different and special consideration needs to be given to certain aspects of their herd health and welfare when keeping these animals. We'll set out below some of the common herd health planning principles which are particularly important for goat keepers and apply whether you have 2 pet goats or several hundred in a specialist commercial enterprise.

Vaccinations:

Goats are browsing animals (not grazers like cattle and sheep) and because of this evolution their immune system has developed in a more broad and less focussed manner, resulting in goats being more susceptible to several diseases which are cattle and sheep may seem more resistant to.

Clostridial disease would be one of the diseases to which I would consider vaccination essential in all goats kept in all management systems. In goats clostridial disease tends to manifest as very sudden onset diarrhoea and rapid death so often out most successful treatment is prevention with the use of a vaccine. Unfortunately, there are no licensed vaccines against clostridial disease within the UK so you must discuss your options for vaccination with your veterinary surgeon and decide on an appropriate booster interval as we know that the immunity gleaned from vaccination does not last as long as in other ruminant species.

Castration:

Goats are commonly castrated if they kept as pets, retained as wethers for fibre production or are to be kept for longer than 4 – 6 months for meat production to avoid “Billy-taint” of meat. Castration before the goat reaches puberty prevents the development of the male odour or unpleasant behaviours such as urine spraying, and of course ensures the animal is infertile. However, this early castration can increase the risk of “stone” formation within the bladder and urinary system. The risk of this can be managed by careful forage nutrition which your vet can help you with.

Kids over 2 months of age must be castrated by a vet using anaesthesia. Kids under 7 days of age can be castrated via rubber ring, in the same way as lambs, by any competent person. If using rubber rings it is essential to ensure both testicles are fully trapped within the scrotum beneath the ring – it can be useful to have your vet demonstrate this procedure first.

Disbudding:

Disbudding is the removal of the horn buds in baby goat kids to ensure that horns don't grow in the adult animal. The reasons for doing this are many and complex and a full breakdown of the pros / cons can be found on the Goat Veterinary Society website (<https://www.goatvetsoc.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/media/Should-we-disbud-and-castrate-kids-John-Matthews.pdf>)

Disbudding of goat kids can only be done by a vet – the horn buds of goat kids are very large relative to the size of the kids skull and the risk of skull fracture or burning of the brain tissue is so high that this procedure is highly skilled and legally only permitted to be done by Vets.

It is strongly advised that horned and non-horned goats are not kept together.

The procedure should ideally be performed in goats aged between 2 – 7 days old, preferably no older than 10-14 days old. If you are considering having your goat kids disbudded then please discuss fully with your vet in plenty of time.

Dehorning of adult goats is a very invasive and stressful procedure. Suffice to say that unless circumstance demands, this is a procedure that is best avoided and should never be undertaken lightly. For an in-growing horn it is usually sufficient and certainly preferable to regularly (every 6 – 9 months) remove a few centimetres off the horn tip with wire or horn nippers.

Lameness:

The trimming of sheep feet has received a lot of attention in recent years and the advice has changed to avoid routine foot trimming, and rather improve the environment in which the sheep live to improve natural wear and be quick off the mark in dealing with problems. With Goats, the various different management styles we have for them makes a generalised approach to foot care very difficult and the adage every farm is different has never been more true or appropriate.

As a generalisation it is true that the majority of the larger goat enterprises house their goats for most of the year, frequently because of worm / parasite control concerns. This means the opportunity for natural wear is reduced and claw overgrowth is a real problem. This necessitates regular routine foot trimming, but this also brings its own complications as gleaned from the sheep sector with trimming being associated with an increased risk of some forms of lameness. It is probably true that the phrase “as often as necessary and as little as possible” reflects the approach needed for the routine foot care of housed goats and particularly those kept as pets.

Goats are susceptible to the same plethora of infectious lameness diseases as sheep, such as Scald, Foot Rot and Contagious Ovine Digital Dermatitis (CODD); with much the same risk factors and treatment options advised. You should discuss specific treatments with your vet as most of the medicines we would want to use are not licensed for use in goats in the UK and will require careful dosing and management.

Examination of individual Goats' feet is best done in the standing goat (they will walk on to tables to save a vet or owners' back if carefully restrained using a neck collar). Goats can get very agitated if turned over, and particularly if they have horns can present a real health and safety hazard to the operator. Foot trimming equipment should be disinfected between each animal. Again, your vet can demonstrate correct trimming technique when on farm.

Worms and Grazing:

Goats do not develop an age-related immunity to worms, unlike cattle and sheep. This means that throughout their lives goats remain susceptible to internal gut worms and the severe disease Parasitic gastroenteritis (PGE). Signs to look out for in grazing animals include; diarrhoea, poor growth rates, ill-thrift, lethargy, and even anaemia.

Faecal worm egg counts are a valuable screening and diagnostic tool in goats but must be interpreted in the clinical context of the animal. Regular worm egg counts are recommended (every 3 weeks in grazed manage mobs). Discuss a worming control plan and grazing management system with your vet to ensure you can manage the threat worms pose to your goats' health whilst at grass. Goats also respond differently to the various wormers available, with few licensed products and often higher dose rates and longer milk and meat withholds required. Treatment options need to be carefully considered with your vet to ensure they remain effective and do not lead to development of worm resistance.

Goats can be hugely rewarding to keep and provide immense amounts of enjoyment to those who work with them. Their curiosity and inquisitiveness can sometimes get them into trouble, beware of their propensity to eat things that they shouldn't – particularly in gardens where many plants are toxic – if in doubt, please keep the goats away / out of the garden. They are natural climbers and can be found on top of almost anything they can get a foothold on so give careful thought to their surrounding environments. If you're considering or already keeping goats, please reach out to your vet for advice, and feel free to visit the Goat Veterinary Society website where you can join the society (open to all, not just vets) and you can access goat advice via their dedicated enquiries email service gvs.enquiries@gmail.com