

18 Things New Owners Need To Know

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By Jo Ann McGrath

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- 1. Don't buy babies younger than 4 or 5 months** Unweaned crias (baby llamas) are not suitable pets. If you have inadvertently obtained one, bottlefeed 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 to a full pound daily. Provide it with another animal for company - preferably a llama - but keep physical human contact to a minimum. An adult llama bonded to a human from near-birth without proper herd socialization can be a danger when the animal treats the human as another llama. 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. Llamas left haltered are in peril**
Because many owners don't train their animals to haltering, or provide a catchpen 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 nose band or with malformation of the nasal passages.
- 3. Llamas should not be tied to trees or posts**
Don't leave your llama tied to any unliving 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 llama.
- 4. Deworming and vaccination.**
Llamas need to be on a regular schedule of deworming. Panacur or Safeguard paste and Ivermectin subcutaneous shots or pour-on liquid have been the recommended dewormers. Ivermectin will not take care of tapeworms - use Panacur or Safeguard paste. Yearly vaccinations (CDT and killed rabies vaccine) are standard. Babies are vaccinated 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. (See Llama Life II, Issue No. 43).
- 5. Llamas frequently choke on concentrated pellets.**
Not every one of them will choke, but if you feed straight pellets to your llamas, 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. Numbers of llamas have died from asphyxiation from spectacular clogging of their airways by saliva-swollen pellets.
- 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 llamas 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 llamas. 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**
Llamas, accustomed to the dry thin air of the South American altiplano, do not handle heat and humidity well. 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. 103 and higher is trouble. Llamas should be sheared in the spring. (See Llama Life No. 38 for detailed heat stress information.)

10. Poison plants and trees

Llamas 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. Llamas don't like to be alone

Even responsible purchasers, who have listened to responsible owners and bought a pair of llamas, 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, llamas show concern when one is separated from the group.

12. Shelter - Fencing

Many llamas 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.

13. Males close to 1 year should not reside with females

And 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 aren't necessary to inflict great and lasting damage. Consult veterinarian about removing tips of fighting teeth. (See Managing Males, Issue No. 39)

15. You 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. Some have used a horse trailer in place of a chute. (See Plans, Llama Life II, Issue No. 39).

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 llama neighbors 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. (See Colostrum, Issue No. 39)

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

Llamas 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.

Take a tip from the Boy Scouts. Have a plan for every contingency. Talk to your vet or an experienced friend who can tell you what to have in a first aid kit. Keep a copy of "Caring for Llamas" in the barn--(RMLA, 7411 North County Road 2 E., Monte Vista, CO 81144--\$27.95 includes postage). In an emergency, "panic" will be your first reaction. You can control this by knowing you have searched out good information--and are prepared with the tools you will need. It could save your llama's life. Llamas have amazed veterinarians and practiced livestock breeders with their hardiness and resistance to disease. However, since they are stoics, as well as being hardy, when a llama manifests symptoms of distress, it's usually serious.