

Goat health – keeping the herd disease-free

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Many goat herds are afflicted with diseases that are costly to control and undermine the profitability of the herd. Examples include footrot, internal parasites (particularly those resistant to many commonly used drenches), Johne's Disease, cheesy gland and CAE (big knee) virus.

In many cases these diseases are brought in with purchased goats. Some even come with donated goats which were unwanted by their previous owner because they 'were always poor', 'never put weight on', or 'wouldn't eat for me'. If you receive such an offer, don't accept it!

When purchasing goats to upgrade the herd, to introduce new genetic material, or just to increase numbers, follow these steps to help prevent the entry or spread of disease:

- Before purchase – check the history. Find out what diseases occur on the seller's property.
- At purchase – thorough examination. Thoroughly examine the goats you intend to buy.
- After purchase – on-farm quarantine. Be sure to keep all new goats in isolation for about 4 to 6 weeks after purchase.

As well as following these three steps when purchasing new stock, you will need to observe good management practices (commonsense routine procedures) to safeguard the health of your herd at all times.

Checking history

Goats that look perfectly healthy can still be carrying unwanted infections or parasites. Check

the complete history of both the goats you intend to buy and the herd from which they originate. You need to know:

- Any previous episodes of illness in the herd. Ask specific questions – for example, 'Have you ever had Johne's Disease diagnosed in this herd?'
- Details of previous illnesses in the individual goats you intend to buy. Ask, for example, 'Have these goats ever been ill, had the scours, been lame or suffered a period of weight loss?'
- The history of drench usage in the herd. Ask what products have been used, how often, and what the dose rates were.
- The vaccination status of the goats. Ask whether they are due for a booster for clostridial diseases or cheesy gland.
- The precise reasons the goats are being sold – for example, are they being culled? Don't buy someone's discarded problems.
- Details of production records for fleece or milk (as appropriate). Ask to see records. For fleece, these should include any fibre testing information that is available. As for milk, check the quality as well as the records: taste the milk!
- Results from any veterinary examinations or blood tests.
- The current status of the seller's herd in the CAE Accreditation Scheme.
- Whether the seller's herd is subject to quarantine or restrictions in regard to any disease. In certain areas herds are quarantined for diseases such as footrot.
- What diseases are common or likely to affect goats in your area and the area from which the goats originate. Consult your local veterinarian if you have any doubts.

Thorough examination

Thoroughly examine the goats you are intending to buy, or employ a veterinarian to do this for you.



- Pick up and inspect closely every foot of every goat you are buying. With larger mobs, check a representative group at least. Look for overgrown horn tissue which may need trimming, inflamed skin around the hoof or between the toes, and any tender areas in the lower legs.
- Check the condition of the coat. It should be shiny and smooth, with no brittleness in the fleece.
- Closely examine the skin for general health and for any marks or lumps. In particular, check for lumps under the skin of the jaw (they could be abscesses in the lymph glands – ‘cheesy gland’), in front of the shoulder and in the flank.
- Check to see that the gums and the conjunctiva of the eyes are moist and pink.
- Check for evidence of recent scours.
- Check teeth to determine the age. With older animals, check the state of the teeth as a guide to general condition.
- In does that have kidded, check the udder for any hard lumps or other indications of chronic mastitis. This is especially important in dairy goats.
- Palpate the testicles of bucks to ensure that there are in fact two. They must be symmetrical and firm, and have no soft spots or lumps.



Inspect goats' feet thoroughly to detect signs of footrot.



Keep newly introduced goats in an isolated area.



If a goat 'never puts weight on', have it examined by a veterinarian.

On-farm quarantine

Even though the foregoing checks may have been done thoroughly, a period of on-farm isolation is a further safety measure.

- Keep all introduced goats in a paddock on their own – the ‘admission area’. This area should be separated by at least two metres, or by a double fence line, from other paddocks with goats.
- Administer any necessary vaccines or drenches immediately after unloading the new stock.
- Carry out preventive measures against coccidiosis as soon as goats enter your property.
- Regularly observe goats for the first 4 to 6 weeks after purchase to see that they are settling in, feeding well, and showing no signs of illness. After this time, you will have a better idea of their general health.
- While newly purchased goats are still in the admission area, consult your veterinarian to arrange for any examination and testing you want done.
- Clean and spell the admission area after each batch. Disinfect the sheds and the feed and water troughs in preparation for further new purchases.

NOTE

There is a risk of introducing disease when visitors enter the property, unless you take special precautions to ensure that footwear and other clothing, especially that of other goat owners, veterinarians and farm advisers, is clean.

When moving backward and forward between the admission area and the rest of the farm yourself, take similar precautions so as not to jeopardise your on-farm quarantine measures.

Good management practices

The maintenance of good health in intensively managed goat herds requires a high standard of care of both the animals and their environment.

Practices that should be considered include the following.

Environmental practices

Keep the goats' environment clean, dry and draught free. This means providing suitable floors or bedding, removing faeces regularly from inside sheds and providing adequate shelter from inclement weather.

Provide adequate drainage from goat yards and work areas so that mud and stagnant water are not a problem.

Restrict access to goat pens. Keep out other domestic animals, particularly cats, dogs and poultry.

Control rats and mice.

'Spring clean' sheds, dairy and yards periodically to remove injurious and contaminated equipment.

Control insects, particularly in the dairy and milk handling and packaging areas, by installing screen doors and windows or electric insect control units, or a combination of these measures.

Provide good quality water, in adequate supplies. (Test the water if you are unsure of its quality.)

Avoiding stress

Do not overcrowd animals in paddocks or pens. Overcrowding concentrates sources of contamination and leads to a higher risk of infection.

Don't stress animals unnecessarily during handling and transport.

Make changes of feed gradually, giving goats time to get used to new types or quantities of feed.

Managing kidding

Supervise does more closely at kidding time. Ensure that the kidding area is easily accessible, readily cleanable, and protected from bad weather and predators.

See that all kids receive colostrum in the first 8 to 12 hours. Kids receive maternal antibodies via colostrum and can only absorb these antibodies in this time. (Note: colostrum deprivation may be recommended in a control program for certain diseases, such as CAE infection.)

Disease control

Separate sick animals from the herd and provide a 'hospital pen' area for continuous supervision and easy access for treatments.

Remove dead animals immediately and dispose of them adequately by burning or burial.

Employ a full and adequate vaccination program for diseases which are likely to affect goats on your property.

Have a veterinary surgeon examine any goats that abort.

Trim feet regularly to maintain soundness, and freedom from footrot and foot deformities.

Control internal parasites. This means using an effective drench at appropriate times for the type of parasites in the area. Pasture management techniques to limit reinfestation may include spelling of paddocks or grazing with other species. Follow the drench strategy suited to your area (details available under the Wormkill and Drenchplan programs).

Control mastitis. In dairy goat herds, carry out the Mastitis Control Program recommended by NSW Department of Primary Industries.

Keep shed floors clean. In intensively managed herds, provide sheds with concrete floors that can be easily cleaned; or slatted floors, so that goats are not in contact with faeces. This is very important in minimising infestations of coccidiosis and internal parasites.



Don't let yards become a health hazard: give them a periodical 'spring clean' to remove unwanted material.



Trim goats' feet regularly to keep them sound.

Wear sensible protective clothing and footwear when working with stock.

Do not handle goats if you are pregnant, especially at kidding time, when there is a risk of contracting toxoplasmosis.

Be meticulous when handling milk, food, or products which you are intending to sell to the public. Be familiar with the regulations of the *Pure Food Act* that deal with these products.

Hygiene and safety

Practice sound personal hygiene: wash thoroughly especially after handling animals, equipment, boots and clothing that may be contaminated,

Wear gloves when handling potentially infected material such as aborted fetuses, foetal membranes, open wounds, faeces and discharges.

Conclusion

Prevention is better than cure. Take every step possible to ensure you don't introduce diseases to your goat herd. Observe high standards of husbandry and hygiene to maintain good health and productivity of your herd.

Further information

Consult your local veterinarian, RLPB veterinarian or the NSW Department of Primary Industries.

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