

Originating from the Andes Mountains of South America, llamas and alpacas are not adapted to handle the high humidity and heat of Oklahoma's summer season. Heat stress can be very harmful and lead to severe illness and even death of affected animals.

Prevention is the key to combat heat stress.

First, keep your animals cool during the warmer months. This can be achieved by providing shade (trees, shade cloth, tall roofed barn), ponds, sand pits, concrete floor or "baby pools" where the animals can lay and cool themselves, and plenty of fresh cool water.

Animals kept indoors are out of the sun, but it is important to have good ventilation and air movement through the barn by using fans and leaving windows/doors open. Obviously, access to an air-conditioned room is the ideal way to cool an animal down.

Shearing helps the animal lose heat through evaporation and is one of the most important ways to help llamas and alpacas keep themselves cool. The most effective method is shearing from head to toe, leaving 1-2 inches of hair on the body. Given that they are able to dissipate heat mainly from their abdomen, a "barrel cut" (chest, abdomen) will help as well.

Proper management and husbandry can help prevent heat stress. Handling of an animal during the warmer months should be done early in the morning, when it is still cool. Breeding to have crias born in the spring is also important. Heat can be an important stressor for a late pregnant dam and newborn cria. Obese animals are more prone to heat stress so proper nutrition and weight management is helpful.

Also, monitor your animals for signs of heat stress during the warmer months. Signs to look for include: nostril flaring, open-mouthed breathing, increased breathing rate (over 40 breaths/minute) and effort, drooling, dullness, going off feed, scrotal swelling in intact males, weakness, and rectal temperature above 104°F.

If these signs are present, call your veterinarian immediately and start the "cooling down" process. Move the animal to a cool area or at least in the shade. Laying in cool water or hosing down the animal all the way to the skin helps cool them down as well. Make sure you are providing plenty of fresh water. Shearing is helpful as long as it does not stress the animal further.

For more information on heat stress in llamas and alpacas, please contact your veterinarian or Oklahoma State University Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital at (405) 744-7000.

This column is provided by the faculty of the OSU Boren Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital.

###