

The “normal” gestation length in llamas and alpacas is highly variable ranging from 330-360 days. The average length is 345 days.

Obviously, a gestation length less than 330 days would indicate the birth of a premature cria. However, a “physiologic” prematurity (also known as “dysmaturity”) can also occur if the baby is born during this normal time frame before it has had a chance to fully develop in the uterus.

Signs of prematurity include: droopy ears often curled on the ends, unerupted incisor teeth, fetal membranes attached to the lips or vulva in females, and weak pasterns.

Many of these crias are not able to stand without support. Typically they should be up and nursing within 1-2 hours after birth. Often preemies have low birth weights—less than 12 pounds for alpacas and less than 18 pounds for llamas. Sometimes they may appear to have difficulty breathing as well.

No matter how alert or “normal” they may appear to be after birth, most premature crias should be seen by a veterinarian immediately. This way, the degree of prematurity can be assessed, and other potential problems (failure to receive enough colostrum, systemic bacterial infections) can be identified and dealt with in a timely manner.

However, there are steps that can be taken prior to leaving the farm and en route to the veterinarian’s office. This is particularly important in crias that seem:

- 1) very weak—unable to rise or pick up their head or neck,
- 2) very cold—temperature less than 100°F,
- 3) to have lots of trouble breathing—breathing faster than 30 breaths per minute and/or excessively flaring their nostrils.

First, it is important to keep the cria “cushed,” or upright, rather than allowing them to lie on one side. This makes it easier for them to breathe. Also, if you store a portable oxygen tank and mask in a safe location on the farm, provide oxygen to the cria during the drive to the veterinarian. This is particularly important if the veterinarian is several hours away.

If the baby is cold, warming blankets and heated rice socks can be used to try to warm the cria. Some of these blankets come with car adapters and can be used while on the road.

If the cria seems very weak and is unable or refuses to nurse, 4-8 cc of corn syrup (such as Karo® syrup) should be rubbed onto the gums every 20-30 minutes as a source of sugar for the baby. Do not, however, force feed the baby.

If any additional questions arise as to how to manage a sick or premature cria, please contact your local veterinarian or call Oklahoma State University’s Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital at 405-744-7000.

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

The large volume of questions does not allow us to directly respond to specific email questions so please watch for your answer in the column. Email your questions for the column to dvmonc.all@postoffice.cvhs.okstate.edu and watch for your answer.

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