



Breeding for Excellence

# Simple Guide to Keeping and Caring for Alpacas

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# What are alpacas?

## What are alpacas?

Alpacas originate from the Altiplano (Spanish for high plain) in west-central South America. Spanning the borders of Peru, Chile and Bolivia, this area of the Andes averages nearly 4000 metres.

Alpacas are one of the camelid species, closely related to the llama. There are four species of South American camelid – Llamas (*Lama glama*) and alpacas (*Vicugna pacos*) are domesticated and vicuna (*Vicugna vicugna*) and guanaco (*Lama guanicoe*) remain wild and are protected species. All four are found mainly in Peru in the Andes, with smaller numbers in Chile and Bolivia.



### ***Vicuna***

It is believed that the alpaca and the llama were domesticated from the wild species vicuna and guanaco over 6000 years ago. The alpaca was developed primarily as a fleece producing animal with meat as a secondary product.

The llama was developed primarily as a pack animal and has the ability to carry about 25kg of weight on its back and travel 10-12 miles per day up and down the mountains of the Andes.

### **There are two types of alpaca:**

A huacaya (pronounced wa-ky-ya) alpaca;

A suri alpaca.

### **Huacaya alpaca**

The huacaya appearance is due to its fibre growing vertically out of its skin in small bundles with a tight crimped wave which makes the fleece sit vertically off the skin giving it a 'Teddy Bear' look. The huacaya fibre is more akin to a woollen process of manufacture.

### ***Huacaya***



### ***Suri***

### **Suri alpaca**

The suri appearance is due to its fibre growing out of the skin in bundles/locks without any crimped wave. This makes the suri locks twist and hang down along the flank of the alpaca giving it an appearance much like a Wensleydale sheep. The suri fibre at its best is akin to silk and lends itself to the worsted process of manufacture. It is seeing increasing use in men's suiting and coats.



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# FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS



## How long do alpacas live?

Alpacas have a lifespan of about 20 years.

## How big are they?

Alpacas stand about one metre tall at the withers (the highest part of the animal's back). Cria, the young, weigh between 6 and 8kg at birth. Adult females weigh between 45 and 65kg, some males can be slightly larger.

## Do they get many illnesses?

Alpacas are hardy and relatively problem free. However, like all

livestock they can suffer from various diseases and may at times require veterinary treatment. They require vaccinations yearly and also regular worming.

## What do they eat?

Alpacas are semi-ruminants, surviving happily on grass throughout the year. Hay must be provided on an ad lib basis all year round – particularly in the winter. Most owners provide a low protein supplementary feed which usually includes additional minerals and nutrients. A grazing regime of between three to five per acre is usual, but will depend on your conditions.

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## How long is their gestation?

Alpacas have a gestation of about 11 months, but this can vary. They give birth to a cria (young animal) that weighs about 6-8kg. Female alpacas tend to give birth in the morning. They rarely have twins but, if they do, it is unusual for the cria to survive. The cria is weaned at about six months of age.

## Are alpacas difficult to breed?

Alpacas are induced ovulators and therefore can be bred at any time, although planning for spring births is preferable. The females are generally remated two to six weeks after the birth. Males become fertile at about 18 months to three years. To ensure successful breeding programmes, only the most outstanding males should be kept back for stud work.

## Do they need special shelter or fencing?

Alpacas need a field shelter, large enough to house all of the alpacas in the field, to allow them to get out of the rain. Alpacas do not challenge fences and so a metre high barrier is adequate. Barbed wire should be removed because their fibre can get tangled in it and they can become trapped.

## Do they affect the pasture?

Alpacas are very gentle on the land because they have padded feet and therefore do not churn up the ground. They deposit their droppings in piles in only a few sites and cleaning up is easier than for other animals.

## How are alpacas transported?

Alpacas are easy to transport in any covered trailer or horse box. They tend to sit down on the journey.

## Can alpacas be kept on their own?

No, alpacas are a herd animal and will become stressed if kept alone even for short periods. They should be kept in groups of three or more. Alpacas can be run with other animals such as goats and sheep and provide good protection from foxes.

## Are alpacas easy to handle?

Alpacas are gentle and easy to handle. They can be halter trained very easily, especially when young. They occasionally spit but only when provoked and then usually at each other. Some will kick when being touched on their back legs but, if handled when young, they can be desensitised in this area. Alpacas only have lower teeth which meet on a hard upper pad. They don't tend to bite, but sometimes pull at clothing to attract attention!

## How often do they need shearing?

Alpacas need shearing once a year, although suris (a particular type) are sometimes sheared every other year. On average, a fleece will weigh between 2.5 kg but some alpacas have the potential to produce up to 5kg.

## What colours can alpacas be?

There are 22 recognised fleece colours ranging from white to fawns to browns to black, there are also greys and rose greys. They generally stay the colour they are at birth throughout life.

## Do alpacas make good pets?

Alpacas make excellent pets. They are intelligent, easily trained

and are usually very gentle with children. They are inquisitive, approaching people who stand and watch them. They will eat out of the hand if time is spent and training to lead by a halter is straightforward.

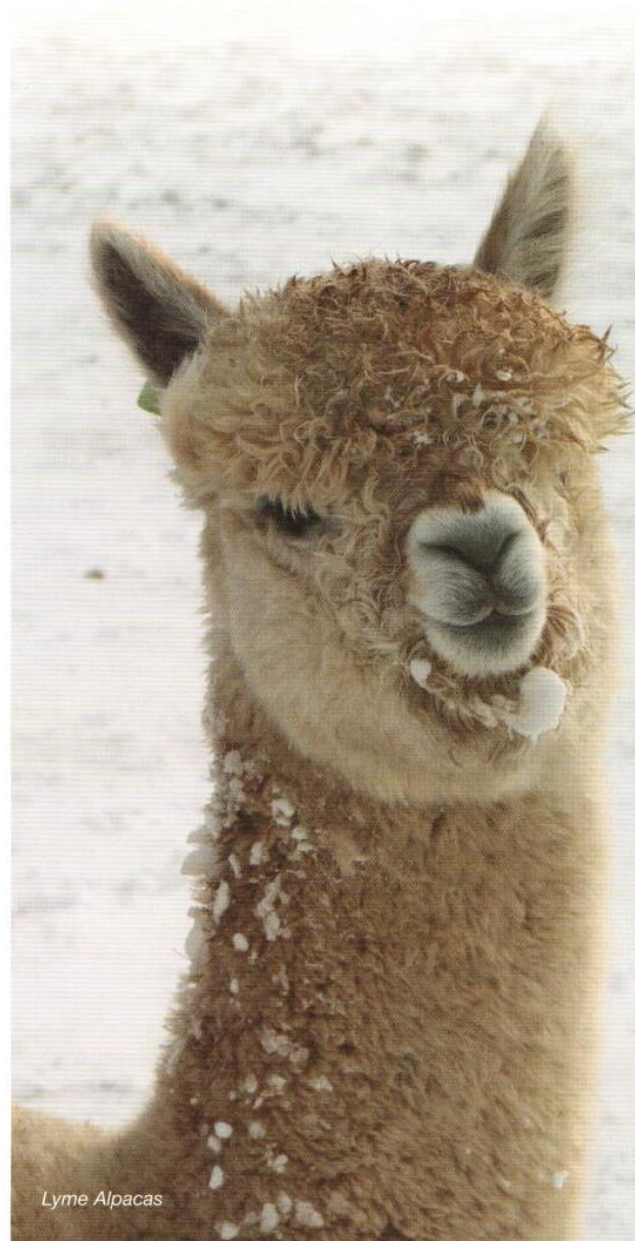
## Can you eat them?

Yes, alpaca forms part of the food chain in South America. It is a very lean meat with a low cholesterol and low fat content. It is rare to find meat offered for sale in the UK as alpacas are generally more valuable alive.

## Where should I go to buy alpacas?

The British Alpaca Society (BAS) strongly recommends that prospective and existing breeders purchase only BAS registered alpacas from owners who are registered with the BAS.

Visit [www.bas-uk.com](http://www.bas-uk.com) for more information.



Lyme Alpacas

# Welfare

- Alpacas are naturally herd animals and only really feel safe with their own kind; they must not be kept singly.
- Generally they are hardy healthy animals and, as with all livestock, they should be checked at least once a day, preferably twice.
- By spending time with your animals you will get to know them and it is easier to tell when they are 'out of sorts'. The earlier problems are detected and help administered, the greater the chance of a speedy recovery.
- Alpacas usually give little indication that they are feeling unwell until they are very sick. Early indications may include loss of appetite, spending more time lying around and not keeping up with the herd. Other symptoms may include abnormal breathing and/or posture, lameness, discharge from the eyes or nose, and just generally looking depressed.
- If there is ever any doubt pertaining to the health and welfare of your animals, veterinary assistance should always be sought.



# Fencing



Alpacas are generally much gentler on fences than other livestock. Fencing that is good enough for sheep will be good enough for alpacas. Electric fencing is unnecessary and barbed wire fencing should never be used. Four-foot sheep fencing using stock netting is suitable for alpacas because they rarely jump and barbed wire should be removed. Post and rail and electric tape fencing can also be used, but avoid electric netting because animals can become entangled.



# Food and Water

- Different groups of animals will have different nutritional requirements.
- Always ensure that there is enough grazing. If there is not, and especially in winter months, the animals should be offered hay or haylage.
- **There must be a constant supply of fresh, clean drinking water.**
- Heavily pregnant and lactating females and other animals also require a supplement concentrate feed during the winter months. When feeding concentrate, ensure that the food is suitable and offered in the correct quantities to meet your animals' nutritional requirements.
- Feeding of sugar beet in the winter is a good source of energy.
- Don't use haynets because animals could get their heads caught and hang.
- Be aware that a number of plants are poisonous to alpacas and steps should be taken to ensure that they are removed from paddocks. There are details at the back of this booklet.

## Shelter



Alpacas need some form of shelter from biting winds, driving rain and hot sun. Thick hedges, shelter belts or high walls will provide adequate shelter if they lie in the path of the prevailing wind. However, if your farm is situated in a particularly exposed, wet or cold position or you don't have any other form of shelter you should consider providing some form of field shelter. These can vary in size from a standard horse field shelter to a barn. They should be sited with the opening out of the prevailing wind and the entrance should be wide enough to prevent individual animals being excluded from it by more dominant alpacas blocking the entrance.

Most alpacas prefer to stay in the open so don't be surprised if they don't make much use of the shelter you provide. However, you can encourage them to become familiar with it by feeding them there. The shelter can also serve as emergency accommodation should you need to bring an alpaca inside for veterinary treatment or isolate it.

# Grazing & Paddock cleaning / Rotation

- Adequate grazing should be provided for the number of animals kept. The stocking ratio for alpacas is four to five per acre. This should be reduced if necessary during winter or when grass is low.
- It is advisable, if possible, to rotate grazing, allowing land to recover. Foot rot is not common in alpacas, but if conditions are extremely wet for prolonged periods, there should be an area of drier ground provided.
- In larger fields, it is advisable to have a small enclosure or catch pen. By feeding animals here they will become accustomed to the area and it will make catching them easier for routine husbandry, training or veterinary care.
- Paddocks must be checked for toxic plants and flowers. Remember that the animals' long neck allows them to reach further than others. Owners should be aware that a number of plants are poisonous to alpacas and should take steps to ensure that they are removed from paddocks.



*Ragwort is poisonous to alpacas*

## Transport

- Animals should not be tied to the trailer in any way, because they will usually sit in transit.
- Flooring to the trailer should be capable of being disinfected - ideally rubber to provide the animals with some form of grip.
- Adult males and females should travel separately and can be divided by a solid partition.
- Travelling time must be monitored. Animals may only be in transit for nine hours out of each 24.





# Handling

- Most handling is easier to carry out in a small area, so a designated area to catch animals is a must.
- Always handle animals with the respect they deserve; if you enter a pen in a mad rush with flailing arms and bullying tactics in mind you will never win. Calm, quiet and gentle, but with an authoritative manner is the way to go.
- Alpacas can be taught quite successfully to lead on a halter. This can be initiated with brief but frequent sessions. It takes time and patience and an understanding of your animals. A halter-trained animal can often make life easier when the vet comes to call.
- Some animals become stressed, nervous or frightened when being handled and respond to this by simply lying down and refusing to move. The more they are handled, the more they will become accustomed to it.
- As a rule, alpacas will usually walk away from you. When moving your animals always walk behind them gently, guiding them to where you want them to go.
- If no catch pen is available, it is possible to catch an animal in a field with the aid of ropes, poles, or even a few friends or family walking around with outstretched arms.
- Always remember that stress is a killer, but not always clearly visible. Please be aware of what you are doing to your animals.
- It is very important that an alpaca's head collar fits correctly.



## Routine Husbandry

- Regularly catch and run your hands over your animals. A fully fleeced animal may not necessarily show outward signs of malnutrition. Body score them, check for burrs and brambles, especially between the back legs because faeces and urine can collect and fly strike can occur.
- Heavily fleeced animals should have their fibre trimmed around the tail and down the rear legs to avoid faeces and urine contamination. Fly strike can also occur on other parts of the body, therefore a thorough inspection of the entire animal is recommended. Vets can advise on products to prevent fly strike.
- If possible, weigh your animals regularly. Weight is often indicative of health; sudden and rapid weight loss should be investigated further.

- A sick alpaca is likely to spend more time sitting or lying stretched out and is reluctant to get up. They will get left behind as the rest of the herd moves on and may look hunched and depressed.
- Foot trimming should be carried out, on average, two to three times a year. However, nails will grow at different rates on different animals. Check nails by actually lifting the feet. They can sometimes look okay from above but by lifting the foot you can clearly see if nails are longer than the pad. Nails left unattended can twist and deform the toes. An alpaca that does not get regular trimming may well develop curling toenails - an unsightly feature indeed!
- Teeth should also be checked at least twice a year. Like toenails, growth will vary from alpaca to alpaca. Teeth that are too long can cause jaw misalignment and teeth that are too short can cause difficulty feeding. Always seek expert advice to correct any irregularities.
- Males should be checked from approximately 18 months old for the presence of fighting teeth and a professional person should remove these.
- Cria should be vaccinated at four weeks and a booster given four to six weeks later. From then on they should fall into the regular schedule of the adult herd (annual vaccinations in line with the manufacturer's recommendation). Ideally the timing of the vaccination cycle should be so that pregnant females are vaccinated about 4–8 weeks prior to birthing in order to boost their immune systems.
- There are two processes by which parasitic worms can be controlled. Firstly, by taking regular dung samples for analysis and only worming animals when worm counts are high. Secondly, by routinely worming all animals every six months regardless. Worming of cria is normally commenced at weaning. Discuss with your vet.
- Shearing should be carried out annually. Suris can be shorn every other year, but Huacayas need to be shorn every year.
- During the long winter months it may be an idea to give your herd a natural boost by giving them A, D and E vitamins. This is especially important for late-born cria because it helps to promote good bone growth and development. A deficiency of vitamin D can lead to rickets.
- In wet conditions, liver fluke can cause problems in some animals. It is more prevalent in some geographical locations. Discuss with your vet and, if necessary, take precautions.
- Coccidiosis is a parasitic disease that affects alpacas, particularly young animals. A number of products are available which can be used to control the problem.
- Diarrhoea, or excessive scouring, especially in young cria, can be fatal if not treated quickly and veterinary assistance should be sought immediately.



# BODY CONDITION SCORE (BCS) of Alpacas

Keeping alpacas on a good plane of nutrition is essential for healthy reproduction as well as minimizing variations in the diameter along the length of the staple. Sudden changes in diet can result in sickness, foetal stress and tender fleece. Seasonal changes in dietary quality and quantity make it essential to monitor your animal's body condition.

Overweight alpacas may be at risk with heat stress, infertility, difficult births, poor lactation and neonatal mortality.

Emaciated alpacas can be susceptible to embryonic loss, stillbirths, poor lactation and underweight neonates.

Variations in frame sizes from one alpaca to another means it is not always accurate to compare the weights between individuals. Mature females should weigh between 60-75kg and males can weigh up to 100kg. (Averages are 70kg for adult females and 85kg for adult males).

The nutritional status and condition of alpacas can be assessed without the need to purchase expensive weighing equipment. Live weight scales will accurately tell you weight changes within individual alpacas. However inaccuracies can occur due to females being in late pregnancy or when there are variations in gut fill between weighings. Body condition scoring can therefore give a more accurate picture of the animal's condition allowing you to optimise nutritional management of your alpaca.

Visual assessment of the condition of alpacas is often misleading as fleece and later stages of pregnancy can hide their true status. There is no substitute for hands-on appraisal. Body Condition Score is based on a scale of 1 to 5, with alpacas in very poor condition scoring 1 and obese alpacas scoring 5.

## How to make a BCS assessment

The most commonly used area is over the central backbone near the last ribs. Do NOT make assessment over the pelvis as this area often feels boney, even with obese alpacas. Body scoring involves placing your fingers on the centre of the back, either side of the vertebrae and feeling for muscle coverage. By palpating the area with your fingers and thumb you can make an appraisal of the muscle mass. It should reveal a firm, slightly convex body shape. Bulging would indicate an overweight animal whereas concave tone indicates underweight condition. To confirm your estimate you can also palpate the area over the ribs at the point of the elbow (in an animal with BCS 2.5 you will just feel the ribs; an animal with impalpable ribs is very fat) and finally, observe and or palpate the hairless area between the front legs (see Fig. 1).

Practicing the technique whenever you handle alpacas will help make your assessments more consistent. Each assessment should not take any longer than about 5 seconds.

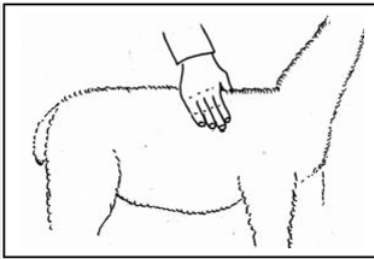
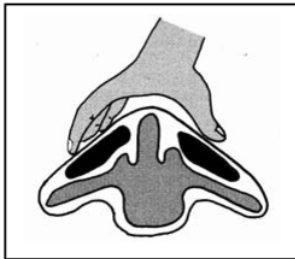
If a low BCS is only due to a shortage of feed (and is not due to other factors such as ill health) alpacas with unlimited access to good quality pasture can take 3-6 weeks to gain one score.



# PADDOCK CARD - BODY SCORING

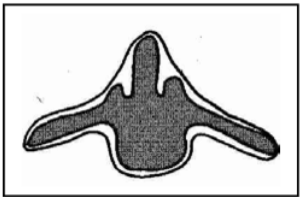
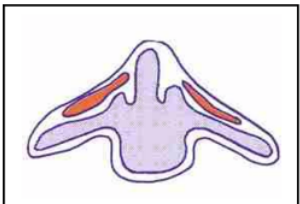
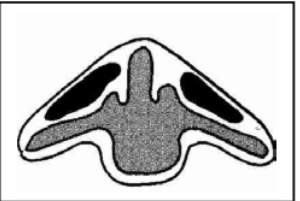
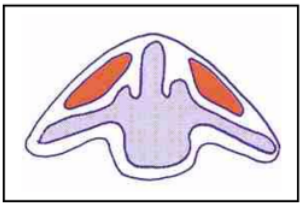
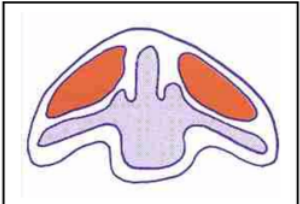
## Alpaca condition or body scoring, a health check

Quick & simple to do & can easily be done on a regular basis



- ✓ Check the spine as per diagram
- ✓ *Keep a record of each body score*
- ✓ Check the ribs at fibreless area behind elbow
- ✓ Look at upper rear legs
- ✓ Feel the chest
- ✓ Look at front legs and chest

Score 1 requires vet inspection asap. Score 4 and 5 may require nutritional advice, or just a diet (no extra feed). **Beware of sudden changes in BS.**

	<b>1</b>	<b>EMACIATED</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-very steep angle along spine &amp; curves inward</li> <li>- ribs are very easily felt</li> <li>- hard bony v-shaped chest, sternum extremely boney</li> <li>- very increased space between rear legs</li> <li>- very little muscle &amp; absolutely no fat</li> </ul>
	<b>2</b>	<b>THIN</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- spinal slope more than 45 degrees</li> <li>- ribs can be easily felt</li> <li>- hard chest with a slight v-shape, very little fat covering sternum</li> <li>- some increased space between rear legs</li> <li>- some loss of muscle</li> </ul>
	<b>3</b>	<b>OPTIMAL (for adult huacaya )</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- about 45 degree angle along spine</li> <li>- ribs felt with slight pressure</li> <li>- firm muscular chest</li> <li>- chest makes straight line between front legs</li> </ul>
	<b>4</b>	<b>OVERWEIGHT (for adult huacaya alpaca)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- convex shape between the backbone &amp; upper ribs (<i>ideal for adolescent huacaya alpaca under one year old</i>)</li> <li>- ribs felt with some pressure</li> <li>- somewhat rounded soft feeling chest</li> <li>- inner thighs smooth &amp; less defined</li> </ul>
	<b>5</b>	<b>OBESE (for adult huacaya alpaca)</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- backbone looks flat (<i>normal in suri and cria &lt; 6 months</i>)</li> <li>- firm pressure needed to feel ribs</li> <li>- rounded soft feeling chest</li> <li>- large area of contact between rear legs</li> <li>- little or no definition on inner thighs</li> <li>- may have difficulty walking properly</li> </ul>

# WORMING

Ideally, do fecal samples, and then your vet will advise which wormer to use. Ideally worm at 6-monthly intervals (May and November are good times for these) if no other animals are kept; worm more often if sheep or other animals are kept in the same field (your vet will advise). It is paramount to use the correct dose, otherwise the worms will simply develop resistance in your herd to the wormer, making it useless to you. It is a good idea to rotate worming products to avoid resistance building up.



# VACCINATIONS

It is usual to vaccinate alpacas against Clostridial diseases, using vaccines licensed for sheep and cattle.

Suggested clostridial vaccinations are as follows: Lambivac, Covexin 10, Heptavac-P Plus (includes Pasteurella), Ovivac or Ovivac-P. Your vet will advise on which of these is the best to use in your area. Heptavac gives protection against Lamb Dysentery, Struck, Pulpy Kidney, Braxy, Blackleg, Tetanus and Black Disease. Dose a cria at 2-3 days with Lamibvac, then again 2 - 3 weeks later, then give annual boosters of any of the other vaccines, as advised by your vet., starting at 6 months of age. Do not dose within 1 month before birthing; ideally dose females when they are 'open'. Adult Alpacas need an annual booster to protect them against clostridial diseases.



# Vitamin Injections

Ireland is at a fairly high latitude, so in the winter the days become very short. Alpacas have evolved at low latitudes where at all times of the year there are long hours of daylight, and bright skies, too. Ireland's gloomy, short winter days will provide insufficient sunlight for the production of vitamin D in the skin, especially in growing animals. It is therefore good practice to supplement Vitamin D by injecting it three or four times during each winter. As a rough guide, plan to administer Vitamin D every 6 weeks between the autumn and spring equinoxes.



# Administration of Injections

This information is provided as a guide for the administration of injections but breeders may have similar techniques which are equally effective. As with most livestock alpacas require injections from time to time but very few medications are registered for use in alpacas. If unsure, consult your veterinarian.

These procedures must be done correctly to prevent:

- Poor absorption.
- Failure to be effective.
- Risk of infection.
- Accidental human injection.

## Preparing for the injection

Preparation for giving injections should be carefully planned to minimise stress to both the animal and the handlers.

Firstly, ensure that the drug is the correct one, **read the label** and follow the instructions which will include:

- Dosage and administration technique.
- Expiry date.
- Warnings and contraindications.
- Handling and storage instructions.

## Technique for preparing the medication

- Wash hands before starting and use sterile equipment.
- Use a separate needle for each injection wherever possible. If injecting numbers of alpacas, change the needle at least every 10 injections.
- Select the smallest gauge needle that can still handle the volume and viscosity of the product. A rule of thumb: the higher the size number, the finer the bore/gauge of the needle.
- Shake product regularly to ensure proper suspension in the container.
- Do not mix products.



- Only insert sterile needles into the bottle. If multiple injections are required, leave a needle in the bottle and use a separate one for the injections.
- Remove dispensing needle before storage.
- Inject air into the bottle before withdrawing the drug. This equalises the pressure.
- After withdrawing drug, hold the syringe and needle up and tap to move air bubbles up.
- Push plunger carefully to remove any air.

## Routes of administration

There are four main routes of administration of drugs by injection in the alpaca. These are:

### 1. Intravenous (IV)

Should only be administered by veterinarians. Reasons for IV may include the taking of blood for laboratory examination, administration of anaesthetic agents, and blood or plasma transfusions.

### 2. Intraperitoneal (IP)

Should only be administered by veterinarians. This method is usually used for the administration of plasma to the newborn cria.

### 3. Intramuscular (IM)

A common method used by breeders for the administration of several drugs e.g. antibiotics, vitamins etc.

### 4. Subcutaneous (SC)

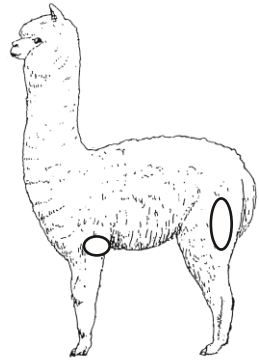
A common method used by breeders for the administration of several drugs e.g. antibiotics, vitamins etc.

# Injection techniques

The method of administering the injection will be stated on the bottle or in the accompanying literature and must be followed.

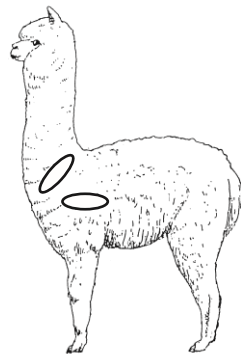
## **Intramuscular (IM) – Figure 1**

- Use a needle long enough to penetrate the skin and fat into the muscle. Make sure needle is perpendicular to the body.
- Pull back slightly on the plunger before injecting to make sure you are not in a blood vessel.
- Inject slowly and gently massage the area when the needle is withdrawn.



## **Subcutaneous (SC) – Figure 2**

- Use a narrow gauge needle.
- Lift the skin and inject into the 'tent' at an angle of 30 degrees to the body. (This technique can be difficult if the animal is in full fleece), or
- Hold the syringe at a 40 degree angle to the skin whilst injecting, or



## **On completion**

Following the administration of any drugs:

- Maintain permanent records for each animal which should include:
  - Date of administration.
  - Product name. – Dosage.
- Dispose of needles responsibly.
- Wash hands and equipment.
- Monitor animal's response for any adverse reaction.

# Alpaca shearing



Alpacas are sheared once a year usually before the end of July, depending on location.

- They are normally sheared lying on their side as opposed to sitting on their rump like sheep.
- Two people lift the alpaca off its feet and lie the alpaca on its side. This can be done on the floor or on a table.
- Once laid on its side the alpaca's front and hind legs are tethered.



- Then the handler holds the head as the shearer shears the fleece off one side. The alpaca is then rolled and turned and the shearer shears the other side.
- The whole process takes about six minutes, causing little distress to the alpaca.
- Alpaca must be sheared annually. If not sheared the fleece will continue to grow for a number of years and cause distress.

## Trimming Toenails



Alpacas have soft padded feet with two toenails on each foot and a soft leathery pad. Depending on the environment the toenails require regular attention at least three to four times a year and at shearing. However, nails will grow at different rates on different animals and in particular the toenails of lighter coloured animals seem to grow at a faster rate than the darker coloured animals. Nails left unattended can twist and deform the foot causing lameness, restriction of mobility and ability to move to graze, and ultimately weight loss.

### Trimming technique

Animals accustomed to being handled and having their toes trimmed are relatively easy to manage. Firm but gentle restraint is far more effective than force and mechanical restraint (e.g. a crush) and is less stressful for the animal. One person gently restrains the animal with the second person carefully trimming the nails. Using a pair of straight edged cutters (foot rot shears, hoof snips or straight edge secateurs) the second person lifts the foot and trims the nails level with the soft pad. Care must be exercised to prevent cutting too deeply and causing bleeding. If this occurs, spraying with an antiseptic solution will minimize the risk of infection.



# Ear Tag and Microchip Insertion

At Westwind Alpacas we herd tag all of our stock for easy identification. It is not a requirement that all British Alpaca Society registered stock have ear tags inserted. However, it is a requirement that all UK registered alpacas have a microchip inserted. These are usually inserted under the left ear. We also tag our crias at birth using a small tag and then insert the larger tag and microchip when they are weaned. These are activities that do not require a vets assistance.



## Halter Training

Halter training is great for many reasons. The main purpose of halter training is to allow for easy movement of your alpacas whether it is from a pen to the trailer or in the show ring or just for fun. We begin halter training at weaning. It is a simple exercise that can take anywhere from two to five or six short five minute lessons. It is a great way to interact with your alpacas and to get them used to you.



## Castrations

Castrations or wethering is a procedure that happens between 12 and 24 months of age and must be carried out by a veterinarian. Again this is a simple and well-practiced procedure that is required to remove males from the industry that do not meet the stringent standards we set. Castration also helps males settle as they get older and two wethers are less likely to fight than two entire males.

## Some other information:

- Young alpacas are called Crias. Females are called hembras and males are called machos.
- Hembras can start breeding after 12 months, but matings are usually unsuccessful until the hembra reaches at least 45-50kg of weight.
- The gestation period is around 11.5 months, but this can vary greatly.
- Hembras usually give birth to single crias. Twins are rare.
- If looked after properly, alpacas can live to over twenty years.
- There are two breeds of alpaca, with the huacaya being much more common than the Suri.
- You can run alpacas in the same paddock as sheep or goats. You shouldn't run them in the same paddock as horses or cattle because of the risk they will be kicked and injured.
- Alpacas respond well to handling and most are easily trained to the halter. However, they don't enjoy being cuddled or touched around the head.
- Alpacas are sometimes used as guardians for sheep flocks, particularly for lambing ewes.

## Breeding

- On average gestation is 345 days although alpaca gestation can vary from 330 to 370 days and there are rare examples of healthy cria being born earlier or later than this. In an ideal world cria would be born in late spring/early summer although this is not always possible. It is not uncommon for breeders to birth cria from March through until October with the right welfare facilities in place.
- Young females are ready to be put to a stud male only when they have reached 60 per cent of the weight of their mother, or are 14 months old. Following a normal birthing and complete cleansing within 12 hours of birth, a female should be in a fit condition to return to a male from 10-14 days post partum.
- It is known that some males are able to breed from about nine months of age but most males are not fertile until they are 2-3 years old.
- During copulation, the stud male intrudes through the cervix of the female and deposits sperm repeatedly into each uterine horn. This action can cause damage to the uterine lining and disrupt a developing pregnancy. Frequent and indiscriminate mating should be avoided.



- The selection of stud males is an important decision. The stud should be chosen to add improvements to the female such as better crimp or lower micron count because the male has a major influence on the quality of the offspring.
- Cria should be weaned at around six months of age.
- It is unwise for the safety of a newly born cria to have expectant mothers birthing in a field with deep puddles, ponds or streams.
- Hypothermia in cold or wet weather can be fatal to young and newborn cria.
- Cria should be vaccinated at four weeks and a booster given four to six weeks later. From then, they should fall into the regular schedule of the adult herd. Worming of cria is normally commenced at weaning. Late born cria can be given vitamin A, D, and E boosters in the autumn as a precaution against rickets.

## Weaning

- Cria are usually weaned from the dam (mother) at six months of age. This ensures that there is enough time for the dam to dry up before the next birthing.
- The advised weight for weaning cria is 25kg or more. Some cria will reach this weight before six months of age. Ask your vet before weaning sooner.
- Weaning can be distressing, therefore it is important to put newly weaned cria out of eyesight and earshot from their dams.
- Males and females can be weaned together but it is advisable to separate the two at approximately 10 months of age.
- Cria are usually administered their first dose of wormer at this time.



**Due to the structure of most people's breeding regimes, cria are usually weaned during the winter months. At this time a dose of vitamins A, D and E would be beneficial to them. Discuss with your vet.**



# Alpaca fibre

Alpaca fibre is one of the most luxurious fibres in the world. It comes in 22 officially recognised colours and every shade in between.

Its most remarkable quality is its softness – alpaca fibre is inherently soft. This is due to the fact it has less scales on each individual fibre, compared to sheep's wool which has many, and more prominent scales on each individual fibre. (Suri alpaca have less scales than huacaya alpaca so their fibre is even softer.) Even at its coarsest, alpaca is inherently softer than sheep's wool and often a certain percentage of alpaca fibre is added to sheep's wool during the woollen process to enhance the handle or feel. The lack of scales and smoothness of the fibre also gives alpaca a natural brightness as the smoother surface reflects the light better. Suri alpaca (because it has less scales) reflects the light like a mirror and is renowned for its deep lustre, as well as its luxuriously smooth handle.



## Properties of alpaca

Alpaca is a dry fibre with a minimum lanolin content which means it does not need to be scoured prior to spinning. It can be spun into yarn straight from the fleece and is often washed at the hank (a coiled bundle or yarn) stage of processing.

At its finest alpaca fibre gets as low as 15-16 microns (the mean of the fibre diameters or average diameter) which is very fine indeed, in fact it is often described as a hard wearing cashmere. At its finest it is used like cashmere to produce high quality, luxury garments in both the woollen process for knitwear and weaving and in the worsted process for fine suiting and materials.



## *Suri fleece*

The fibre from the huacaya alpaca (those that look like teddy bears) is more suited to the woollen process and the fibre from the suri alpaca is a lot like silk and more akin to the worsted process. At its finest, women's lingerie can be made from suri fibre.

However, even on a global scale, alpaca fibre is still very much a niche market. There are roughly three million kg of alpaca fibre produced in South America every year and this still only represents .04% of all the fibres processed in any given year. The average alpaca produces around 2.4kg of alpaca fibre per annum, with some having the potential to produce around 4-6kg per annum.



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# POISONOUS PLANTS

**A**lpacas are resilient animals raised on the harsh landscapes of the mountainous continent of South America but sometimes their stomachs can be vulnerable.

Renowned for refusing to show any signs of illness, it is all the more important for owners of alpacas to get to know their animals and ensure all measures are in place to prevent ill health.

Consuming poisonous plants can have long term effects on a camelids health, from irreversible heart or liver problems to shorter-term problems like diarrhoea and in worst cases can prove fatal.

On the whole alpacas will avoid plants that are toxic due to

a bitter taste or unfamiliar smell, but when these plants, such as ragwort, are dried in hay or in cut grass they become more palatable and problems can occur.

Symptoms of consumption of a toxic plant can range from laboured breathing, to diarrhoea to drooling where the alpaca is attempting to vomit. Staggering, hypothermia and trembling dilated pupils are also common symptoms.

Alpaca owners should inspect their paddocks and hedgerows regularly and become familiar with the appearance of these deadly plants, taking the necessary precautions to remove them.

Here is a list of some common plants toxic to alpacas.

## A

Acorns

Alder Buckthorn

## B

Black

Bryony

Black Nightshade Box

Bracken

Broom

Buckthorn Buttercup

## C

Celandine – Greater

Charlock

Cherry Laurel

Chickweed

Clover

Columbine

Cotoneaster

Cuckoo Pint



## D

Darnel

Deadly Nightshade

## F

Foxglove

## G

Grass cuttings

Ground Ivy

Groundsel

## H

Hellebore

Hemlock

Hemlock Water Dropwort

Hemp Nettle

Henbane

Herb Paris

Horse Radish

## I

Iris



## L

Laburnum  
Larkspur  
Lily of the Valley  
Linseed  
Lupin

## M

Marsh Marigold  
Meadow Saffron  
Melilot  
Mercury  
Monks Hood

## O

Oak

## P

Pimpernel  
Poppy  
Potato  
Privet



## R

Ragwort



Rhubarb  
Rhododendron  
Rush



## S

St John's Wort  
Sorrel  
Spurge

## T

Thorn Apple

## W

White Bryony  
Woody Nightshade

## Y

Yew

If you are concerned that your alpaca has consumed any of these plants and is showing an adverse reaction, contact your veterinarian.  
*Courtesy of Barbara Reed.*

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## POISONOUS PLANTS

The root systems of trees and shrubs go much deeper than grass roots and their leaves contain many minerals that are no longer obtainable on surface herbage. An alpaca in its natural state is a browsing animal that finds nutrients not only in pasture, but also in the leaves, twigs and bark of these trees and shrubs.

Camelids are browsers because their mineral needs are high and this can then cause problems when they graze on dangerous plants. Many poisonous plants are not palatable and would only be eaten in desperation - an alpaca that has access to good quality mineralised pasture (soil analyse and/or use Grasstrac every year), coupled with good quality ad-lib hay and quality mineralised Camelid feed is much less likely to suffer plant poisoning, providing of course they do not have access to high-risk herbage like Rhododendron (see below).



### ***Below is a list of commonly found poisonous plants:***

- Ivy, particularly berries
- Privet, particularly flowers and berries
- Ragwort, cumulative effect
- Bracken, cumulative effect
- Buttercup, most toxic at time of flowering with 'burn' effect on mouth/lips
- Foxglove
- Horsetail
- Pine, other than a small wind-blown branch, cupresses, Lleylandi
- Rhododendron and Azalea, deadly
- Yew, deadly
- Laurel
- Laburnum, deadly
- Oak leaves and acorns in high quantities
- Horse Chestnut – all parts, bark, flowers, leaves and conkers
- Hemlock, deadly
- Maples – all Acer family
- Elderberry – cyanogenic plant
- Hydrangea
- Cherry
- Box
- Oil Seed Rape Brassica family - suspect
- Deadly Nightshade/potato and tomato stalks

### ***Also many of our ornamental garden plants, for example:***

- Hypericum (St John Wort),
- Arum lilies - Lily of the Valley
- Aconite
- Lilac,
- Heliotrope,
- Larkspur
- Variegated Thistle
- Delphinium
- Lupin
- Iris
- Flowering bulbs, e.g. daffodils, snowdrops
- Lantana
- (Rhubarb)



**Disclaimer: Westwind Alpaca practices detailed in this overview do not constitute veterinary advice. Any alpaca appearing to have an adverse condition should be assessed by a veterinarian.**