

#2 Alpaca Birthing and Cria Care

The majority of cria are born during the morning or early afternoon. Births occurring in the late afternoon or into the evening may indicate a problem. Although most births will not require intervention, it is advisable to monitor females closely as they approach their due date to avoid the risk of loss of cria, mother or both due to a birthing problem.

Wean previous cria at least 5 months prior to birthing time and remove them from pregnant females. Females should be vaccinated a month before the due date of the cria. Always record the details of any alpaca that requires assistance giving birth and consider culling the animal if a repeat occasion occurs.

Labour

Normal labour is a continuous process initiated by hormonal changes but it can be broadly divided into three stages.

- Stage one: The cervix relaxes and uterine contractions commence to propel the foetus into the birth canal. This stage may last 2-6 hours (or longer in first pregnancies). Signs include restlessness, discomfort, increased humming, increased defecation and urination, segregation from the herd and decreased appetite. Many alpacas show no obvious signs of being in first stage labour.

Look for signs of discomfort – rolling, frequent visits to the dung pile, wandering away from the herd, frequent lying down, and immediately getting back up, or sitting in kush with the hind legs extended to the side.

- Stage two: Uterine contractions increase in frequency to aid expulsion of the foetus. The female may lie down and rise up several times; there is abdominal straining; the amniotic sac (or water bag) may appear at the vulva and rupture. (Note: much less fluid is released than in other species). Both forelimbs appear together at the vulva and the head emerges either above or below the legs. Once the head appears, delivery is usually completed quickly. Most females deliver in the standing position. Stage 2 is usually completed in 30-45 minutes (sometimes longer for maidens). Cria may 'hang' for up to 20 minutes – this is normal and helps with initiating lung function and clearing any fluids.
- Stage three: the placenta should be expelled about 45-60 minutes after the birth. Alpacas do not eat the afterbirth nor lick their offspring.

Dystocias (Difficult births)

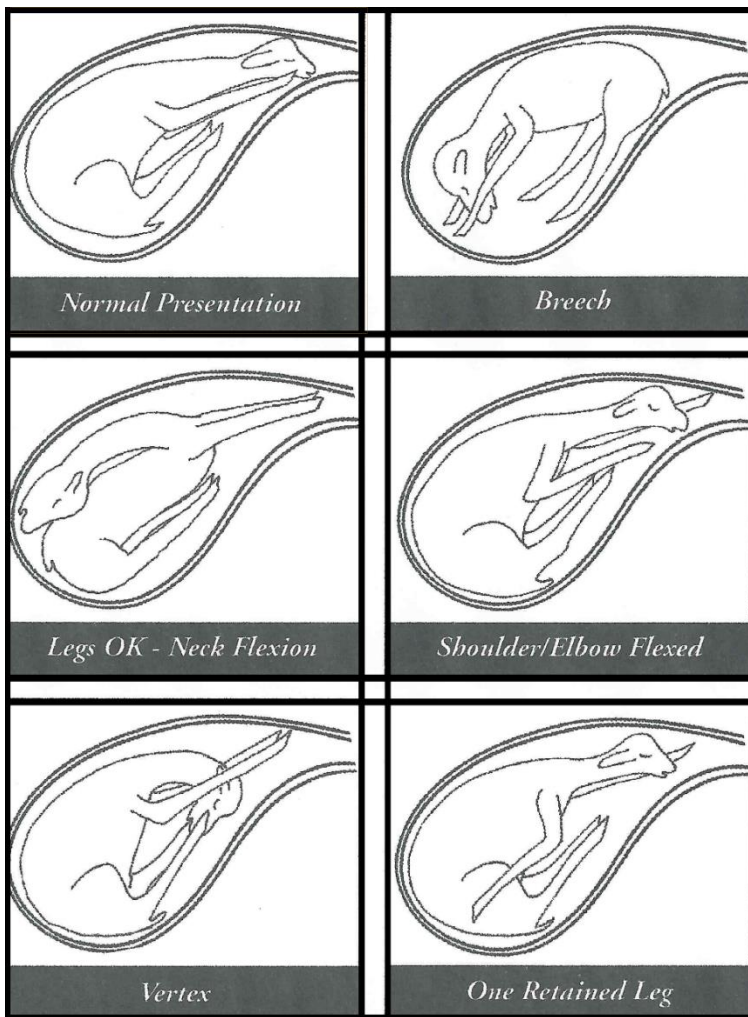
In alpacas the dystocia rate is low (2%-5%) but in such cases immediate assistance is generally required. Most dystocias are due to abnormal presentation or position of the foetus in the uterus. Dystocia may also be caused by maternal reproductive problems such as infection, poor nutrition or obesity where excess fat in the birth canal reduces the area for the foetus to pass through. against the birth canal.

Complications can arise and immediate veterinary help should be sought if:

- Stage one has gone for 4-6 hours with no signs of progress.
- Stage two extends longer than 30 minutes.
- There is a malpresentation – less than two front legs, no head (twisted back), tail showing (breech birth).

Disclaimer: This advice is of a general nature. Seek veterinary or expert advice for your circumstances.

- Placenta is retained more than six hours after birth or not delivered completely.



Post-partum Problems

Problems after parturition (ie. post-partum) are uncommon, but may include prolapse of the uterus and vagina, haemorrhage, uterine tears and uterine infections. Good hygiene is important when dealing with a dystocia to reduce the risk of introducing infection into the uterus.

Post-partum breeding: When to rebreed?

Involution (i.e. return to normal size) of the uterus progresses rapidly in alpacas and is complete by three weeks after parturition. A small amount of blood tinged discharge is sometimes seen during the first 5-7 days post-partum. In general, rebreeding should be delayed until 15-20 days post-partum, and occasionally a female may not be receptive for up to 40 days post-partum.

Infertility

Compared with many other livestock, infertility in alpacas is relatively uncommon and most problems can be resolved using different management strategies. Fertility problems should always be discussed with your veterinarian, who will be able to carry out the necessary reproductive examination and fertility assessment. Alpaca owners should keep good breeding records, as an accurate history is a vital part of any fertility assessment.

Disclaimer: The advice given here is of a general nature. More detailed information for your area may be provided by an agronomist, veterinarian or other expert with local knowledge.

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Cria Care

The newborn cria is often covered by a very thin membrane which dries and rubs off easily. This may need to be gently removed if it is around the nose and mouth. Initial bonding between the newborn and dam is vital. If assisting with the birth, leave immediately after checking the health of the cria and allow this bonding to occur. Observations should be made from a distance.

The stump of the umbilical cord should be sprayed with an antiseptic spray (such as Betadine) to prevent infection. If the umbilical stump bleeds profusely, use a plastic cord clamp.

The cria should:

- have easy respiration
- sit up in the 'cush' position within 5-10 minutes
- have a normal temperature of between 36.8°C-39.2°C (local weather conditions should be taken into account i.e. contingencies should be considered if there is a low cria temperature in wet and windy weather)
- be active almost immediately - be attempting to stand within 30 minutes and standing within 2-3 hours
- be attempting to suckle within 60 minutes and suckling within 4 hours
- have a birth weight of between 6.5kg-8kg

If any problems are evident then immediately consult a veterinarian

Colostrum

The first milk from the mother is called colostrum, a thick, creamy milk that provides the newborn with essential nutrients and is the only source of antibodies to help prevent infection. The cria must suckle from the mother within 12-24 hours after the birth to gain maximum benefit from the colostrum. If the cria is not attempting to feed or the mother has no milk, seek immediate veterinary advice.

First days and weeks after birth

Daily weighing of the cria in the first week of life will provide vital information as to the adequacy of the mother's milk and cria's ability to suckle.

Cria generally gain weight at around 200-250gms per day (after an initial drop in the first 24-48 hours) and should double their birth weight in one month.

If there is a chill factor (i.e. wind and rain) or an air temperature <5°C the cria may require a coat to keep it from getting cold. A piece of clear bubble wrap packing material over the back and secured under the belly with adhesive tape can be a useful substitute for a tailored cria coat in an emergency. The coat must not cover the tail, as this is a major scent area.

Cria are normally very active particularly around dusk. If a cria seems very quiet or 'flat' then suspect a problem and seek veterinary advice.

Weaning:

Cria should be weaned between 3-6 months of age (particularly if the female has been re-mated and is pregnant), ideally between 4-5 months.

Successful weaning is best achieved with the cria and mother out of sight and earshot of each other. The newly weaned cria should be with other weanlings or non-dominant adults and if there is not a plentiful supply of green pasture ensure all youngsters are getting access to high quality supplementary feed.

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