

Maryland Small Ruminant Page

Sheep and Goats as Pets

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Sheep and goats are increasingly being kept as pets or companions. They are easy to handle and respond well to human attention. This fact sheet provides basic guidelines for their selection and care.



Selection

As with any pet, you should not get sheep or goats on an impulse. Do your research and make informed decisions. Make sure your zoning regulations and/or housing development allows you to keep farm animals. Ask yourself if you have the time to take care of sheep or goats and make sure you have a plan if you go out of town. Think about what you will do if they don't work out as pets. Sometimes, it can be difficult to find other people to adopt sheep or goats as pets.

Any breed of sheep or goat can be raised as a pet or companion. It is usually a matter of personal preference. However, many people prefer the miniature breeds of goats for pets (e.g. Nigerian Dwarf, Pygmy).

For sheep, hair sheep are a good choice (for pets) since they don't require shearing or docking. Their coats contain a mixture of hair and wool that is shed annually. Since sheep and goats are herding animals, it is usually best to have at least two. Several more are necessary for sheep to express their natural herding behavior.

For pets, females (ewes and does) and wethers (castrated males) are preferred to intact males. Rams and bucks (billy goats) will get larger and be more aggressive than females and wethers. Male goats have a offensive odor during the mating season (fall). Rams like to butt and cannot be trusted. While most sheep do not have horns, almost all goats are born with horns.

Polled sheep and disbudded goats usually make better pets than horned animals. Horned animals can get their heads stuck in fences and feeders, and they will use their horns as weapons against other animals or people. It is best not to mix polled and horned animals. Otherwise, it's usually okay to keep sheep and goats together.

Fencing/Containment

There are many different kinds of fencing that will contain sheep and goats. Keep in mind that goats are known for their ability to find “holes” in fences. Equally as important as containing sheep and goats in an enclosure is keeping predators out. Sheep and goats are prey animals; thus, very vulnerable to attacks by predators, such as dogs and coyotes.

If you or your neighbors have pet dogs, you need to make sure the dogs do not pose a risk to your sheep or goats. Most pet dogs possess a natural predatory instinct. Even if dogs do not attack a sheep or goat, they can cause tremendous stress and trauma to it, especially if it is pregnant.

The most common type of fencing for sheep and goats is woven or net wire. Woven wire consists of horizontal lines of smooth wire held apart by vertical wires called “stays.” High-tensile, smooth wire, electric fences are also popular on sheep and goat farms, but less practical for small enclosures. A split-rail or board fence can be used for sheep and goats, so long as the boards are covered with a mesh wire or electric wires are placed between the boards.

Barbed wire fences are generally not recommended for sheep and goats. If sheep and goats are tethered (staked out) for grazing, they will be extremely vulnerable to predators. They may also get tangled in their line. For this reason, tethering is not recommended unless you are there to watch over the animal while it is grazing.

Shelter and exercise space

Ideally, you should have a pasture (or two) for your sheep or goats. An acre of pasture is usually enough for a couple of sheep or goats. If pasture is not available, the sheep or goats can be kept in a pen or lot. The exercise yard should be at least 50 square feet.

Sheep and goats should have protection from extreme weather conditions. Their shelter does not need to be fancy or expensive. It just needs to provide a way for them to get out of the rain, snow, or wind. Goats do not like to get wet and will seek shelter quicker than sheep and other livestock. The shelter should be kept dry to prevent hoof or other disease problems.

Health care

If fed and managed properly, most sheep and goats maintain good health. The most common health problem they may experience is internal parasites or “worms.” Worm eggs in their feces hatch and develop into infective larvae, which get onto the grass. Sheep and goats get infected with worm larvae when they graze pasture or eat off the ground. It’s okay (and normal) for sheep and goats have some worms in their systems (it’s natural), but too many worms can make the sheep or goat sick or even cause its death.

The worm parasite that causes the most health problems is called the barber pole worm. It is a blood sucking worm that causes the animal to lose blood and get anemic. If the blood loss is severe enough, death may result. You can tell if your sheep or goat has too many

barber pole worms by examining the color of its lower eyelid. If it is pale (pinkish-white or white), you should deworm your sheep or goat with an effective dewormer.

Young animals (less than 12 months of age) are particularly susceptible to parasites and may require one or more treatments (called dewormings) during their first year of life. Older animals develop immunity to parasites and may not require much, if any, deworming. The drugs used to kill worms are called anthelmintics. You should use drugs that are approved by the Food & Drug Administration for sheep and/or goats. A veterinarian can write a prescription for a non-approved drug. This is usually necessary for goats.

Another common parasite of sheep and goats is coccidia. Like stomach worms, coccidia are a normal inhabitant of the sheep or goat's digestive system. They are a single-cell protozoa that can cause scours (diarrhea) and weight loss. Coccidia damage the lining of the small intestine, where nutrients are absorbed. As a result, a severe infection can permanently stunt an animal's growth. As with worms, young lambs and kids are most vulnerable. Adult sheep and goats develop immunity and are seldom overcome by symptoms. Each species of animal is affected by a different species of coccidia. For example, chickens cannot give coccidia to goats or sheep.

The drugs which kill stomach worms are different from the ones that kill coccidia. The drugs which treat coccidiosis are also different from the ones that prevent coccidiosis. Consult a veterinarian for treatment recommendations. Coccidiostats (Bovatec®, Rumensin®, and Deccox®) are products which slow down the development of coccidia. They can be included in the feed, mineral, or water to prevent clinical disease. However, they are toxic to horses, ponies, and donkeys.

Sheep and goats should be vaccinated annually for clostridial diseases (overeating disease and tetanus), especially if they are pregnant. The vaccine commonly used is called CD-T (toxoid). The first time a sheep or goat is vaccinated it will require two injections, 3 to 4 weeks apart. CD-T vaccinations are not difficult to give. The vaccine is injected under the skin. If you want your sheep or goats vaccinated for rabies, a veterinarian will need to do this for you.

Occasionally, pet sheep and goats get sick. When a sheep or goat is not feeling well, it may isolate itself and stop eating. It will probably hang its head down. Its ears and tail may droop. Teeth grinding is a sign of pain. Pain can sometimes be alleviated with aspirin. Normal body temperature for a sheep and goat is 102-103°F, so anything above this is indicative of a fever and infection. Infections are usually treated with antibiotics.

Non-infectious causes of diarrhea can be treated with probiotics (e.g. plain yogurt), Kaopectate, or Pepto-Bismol. You should never give Immodium AD because it paralyzes the digestive tract of the animal. Many digestive upsets can be treated with antacids. Consult a veterinarian if your sheep or goat does not respond to treatment or you're not sure what to do for it.

Hoof care

Sheep and goats usually need to have their hooves trimmed. Some require hoof trimming every few months, while others only need their hooves trimmed once a year (sometimes

less). The purpose of hoof trimming is to remove excess hoof growth, so that the animal will walk normally and not be at unnecessary risk for developing hoof problems. You should purchase a proper pair of hoof or foot paring shears for trimming sheep and goat hooves.

You can trim a goat's hooves while it is standing up, simply by lifting up its feet. It is easier to trim a sheep's hooves while the sheep is tipped on its rump. When trimming hooves, avoid cutting off large chunks of hoof. Stop trimming when the hoof is pink. This means you are getting close to the blood supply. When you are finished trimming, the nail, sole, and heel should be parallel with the growth bands around the outside of the hoof.

Shearing

Most sheep and Angora goats require shearing at least once per year. Cashmere goats may require combing or shearing. Shearing is best done by a trained professional using electric clippers (shears). It's possible to buy your own clippers and learn to shear your own animals. For pets, it's best to choose animals that don't require shearing.

Feeding

When feeding pet sheep or goats, the most important thing to realize is that sheep and goats are ruminant livestock. They chew their cuds. Their stomachs are composed of four parts and are designed to eat forage: grass, clover, weeds, hay, briars, and shrubs. Sheep are grazers and prefer to eat weeds, grass, and clover, whereas goats are browsers. They will eat grass, but they prefer to eat woody plants, shrubs, trees, and leaves. Goats and sheep will eat plants that many other livestock refuse. They may also eat plants you don't want them to.

A sheep or goat's nutritional requirements depend upon its size (weight), age, and stage of production. A mature sheep or goat that is not pregnant or nursing babies does not have very high nutritional requirements. It only needs to consume approximately 2 percent of its body weight per day in dry feed. In other words, 3 lbs. of hay would meet the needs of a 150 lb. animal. Protein requirements are only 8 to 10 percent of the diet.

For much of the year, pasture or browse will meet all the nutritional requirements of mature pet sheep and goats. If sufficient pasture is not available due to drought or winter -- sheep and goats can be fed hay. Unless it's extremely poor quality, grass hay is usually all that's needed to meet the maintenance requirements of mature ruminants. Alfalfa hay is not necessary or recommended for pet sheep and goats.

Grain should only be fed to mature pet sheep or goats as a treat or training tool. Some grain can be substituted for hay, but only if the hay part of the diet is restricted and the grain is introduced to the diet slowly. Feeding too much grain can cause many health problems in sheep and goats (e.g. overeating disease, acidosis, polioencephalomalacia, and urinary calculi).

When feeding grain, you should purchase 100% nutritionally balanced sheep and goat feeds, and these feeds should not be mixed with other feed products. Sheep have a low tolerance for copper in their diet and should not be fed feeds that have been formulated for other animals, including goats.

If you breed your goats or sheep, their nutritional requirements will change according to their stage and level of production. Lambs and kids (< 12 months of age) have higher nutritional requirements than mature sheep and goats. It is okay to give them small amounts of grain while they are still growing.

It is very difficult to keep pet sheep and goats from becoming fat. A little fat is okay, but it is not healthy for an animal to be obese, any more than it is healthy for people to be overweight. Grain is like candy to sheep and goats; don't overfeed it. It is less likely for a sheep or goat to get fat or have digestive upsets if they are consuming a forage (pasture or hay) diet.

All feeds should be fed in a trough or manger. Sheep and goats will not eat feed that has been soiled or contaminated with feces. Forcing livestock to eat off the ground or pen floor puts them at risk for ingesting worm larvae and coccidia oocytes.

It is a good idea to give your sheep and goats access to a trace mineralized salt. Loose mineral mixes are usually better than mineral blocks. Sheep should be given a mineral that has been formulated specifically for sheep, and goats should be given a mineral that has been formulated specifically for goats. If sheep and goats are fed together, a sheep mineral should be used, since it does not contain extra copper. If necessary, supplemental copper can be provided to goats via Copasure boluses.

It goes without saying that sheep and goats should always have access to fresh, clean water. Unlike cattle, sheep and goats will not drink dirty water. If they are getting sufficient moisture from their feed, don't be surprised if they don't drink a lot of water. Sufficient water intake helps to prevent the formulation of kidney stones in the urinary tract of male goats and sheep.