

Supplementation

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Alpacas and llamas have simple yet special dietary needs. They require less food per day than other livestock (adults average 2 ½ /-3 1/2 lbs. day of forage) and lower quality forage than others. Alfalfa hay, for example often has a protein level of 25% or more which can cause bloating in lamas (lamas refers to alpacas and llamas). Good second cut, fine stemmed mixes of orchard grass and with a small amount of clover or alfalfa (no more than 35%) are healthy and palatable to the lama. Depending upon the source, second cuttings may be too high in protein and calories so first may be preferable. Hay should always be clean smelling (not sour) with no signs of mold and stored in a dry dark place away from moisture sources. Hay should always be tested for overall nutrition from the center of the bale. Unfortunately, there are both honest and dishonest hay dealers. You'll save the most money if you purchase hay no later than mid summer; prices can double by fall. Depending upon your region and pasture growing season, you may want to contract for up to 6 months of hay at a time. If space is limited, most dealers will schedule multiple deliveries for a nominal additional fee. If you're just starting out and there are other alpaca or llama breeders in your immediate area, you can pool your orders to save on the per bale cost.

Most lama breeders supplement pasture and hay with grain and minerals. Pellets are popular and several large manufacturers such as Pro Forma as well as regional suppliers now offer lama designed formulations such as Lama Tex. Pellets, however, can cause choking, indigestion and in some cases allergic reactions due to the binder used. Incidents of choking can be reduced and even eliminated by making sure pellets are really well spread around so that the lama is forced to take only small amounts at a time. Ideally, simple grains mixed specifically for lamas and for their age, condition and jobs in life are best. Every lama does not need to be fed grain every day but this means more separation of your herd in terms of space. The following are some basic recommendations which should be adjusted for your region and environmental conditions (winter vs. summer, heat stress etc.):

Geldings and studs should receive pasture/hay and a cracked corn and/or crimped oats supplement depending upon body. If geldings begin to show fat accumulation, which is common, reduce or eliminate grain. Studs actively breeding (particularly during high heat/humidity conditions which is not recommended) may require additional grain rations.

Nursing and pregnant females need free choice pasture/hay and supplemental grain. A mixture of cracked corn, crimped oats and soybean meal is a good higher protein mix for their greater nutritional needs. COB (corn, oats and barley) is popular as is believed to promote a good supply of milk. Second cutting hay is worth the additional expense for this group.

Weanlings are actively growing and need a protein/calorie level between that of males and pregnant/lactating females.

The amount of grain fed to each group should be based upon regular body condition checks (ask your vet or breeder you purchase from how to do this). Vary the protein/calorie level and amount fed according to condition score.

Molasses- often the binder used in pellets and grain mixes is not necessary for proper lama nutrition although they love its taste. It just adds calories.

Lamas all need some type of mineral supplement. The exact type is based upon what is in your pasture and hay and is determined by your region. Consult with your vet and other local lama breeders. It may be given free choice (in feed bins always available) or you may have to mix it with grain supplements as many lamas don't like the taste. We have found loose salts to be preferred over block salts.

Lamas are not horses, sheep or cattle so premixes for them are not appropriate. Most mixes for other livestock contain too much or too little of required minerals not to mention improper calorie/protein levels. Some goat mixes come close- you'll learn to read labels carefully comparing contents with necessary lama nutritional requirements.

Clean, cool fresh water (lamas don't like warm water and often won't drink it) should always be available. It may need to be heated in winter to prevent freezing (especially if you use small buckets rather than troughs- submersible heaters are available for both). Remember consumption during high heat/humidity periods will increase; automatic waterers are expensive but should be considered if possible as another level of insurance.

If one of your alpacas becomes ill or injured and requires the use of antibiotics as treatment, you will need to supplement their feed with a probiotic. Ruminants rely upon naturally occurring bacteria in their stomachs to aid in proper digestion; antibiotics kill these desirable bacteria requiring supplementation. Homeopathic treatments like plain cultured yogurt are ok but don't contain the wide range of live cultures alpacas require. Probiotic supplements are available at most feed supply stores, vet clinics as well as the mail order suppliers.

When introducing animals to a new environment, they are under stress. To minimize this, it is best to always get several days worth of hay and grain/mineral mix (and water too if possible) to feed them after transport. You can slowly add in your own mix to make an easier transition. Loose, runny stools are not uncommon after transport but should not persist for more than several days. If you already have animals, new additions should be quarantined for at least a week to watch for signs of disease or other communicable conditions. Refer to your veterinarian for area specific problems.

For an industry dependent upon sound reproduction, we know little about proper nutrition especially for pregnant females. Until they were first imported into North America and Australia in the mid-80's for commercial breeding

purposes, very little research had been done on their nutritional requirements. What little had been done in Peru was lost in the 70's when Shining Path terrorists destroyed the Alpaca Research Station and its records. Thus, the lama breeder is faced with trying to cull information from many sources (books, vets, other breeders, and the internet) and their own observations of their herd to develop a comprehensive nutrition program. The most important factors are always basic lama nutritional guidelines augmented by individual body condition scoring and behavioral observation. A properly fed lama is a happy lama. Overweight lamas do not lose weight easily while underweight animals often show loss of appetite requiring separation and special dietary adjustments and feeding techniques.

This is by no means a comprehensive discussion of the nutritional requirements of camelids: simply a primer to get you started. Again, veterinarians, industry acknowledged experts, other breeders are among the many sources that should be consulted.