

Goats

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Goats in the United Kingdom are kept for a number of reasons; they are farmed for their milk, meat, hair (mohair/cashmere) and hide. They may also be used to graze land (1). There are around 88,000 goats in the UK, half of these are adults used for breeding purposes. In England and Wales there are 33,000 milk-producing goats.

The domesticated goat '*Capra hircus*' is found throughout the world, of which there are around 770 million (2, 3). In 2008, 9,526 goats were slaughtered in the UK (4). Most goat meat comes from kids, usually males which are surplus to the dairy herd (2).

Goat Production & Welfare

Goats naturally like to browse and cover a wide range for their food/grazing. They prefer to live in social groups and appear to enjoy human contact. Their coats are made from hair and, unlike sheep, which produce an oily secretion (lanolin) into the wool, goats do not have natural waterproofing and therefore like to shelter in the wet weather (1). Goats are very inquisitive, social animals, but unlike sheep are not as flock-orientated (5, 6).

Goats in the UK cover a variety of breed types, each with its own unique characteristics. Many breeds require more protection from inclement weather than cattle/sheep, all breeds however require some form of shelter. Goats housing should be dry and well-lit with sufficient ventilation which does not cause draughts and their lying area should be covered (1). Housed goats should have access to a yard/pasture. The Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs guidelines state that the space allowance when penned should be calculated in relation to the age, size and class of stock. This and the size of the group should be based on appropriate advice (1).

A goat under 6 months of age is known as a 'kid', with the act of a female goat giving birth being known as 'kidding'. Adult female goats are called 'does', and the term 'nanny' is applied to mother goats with kids. Male goats are referred to as 'bucks' and when they are castrated they are known as 'wethers' (5). Female kids become sexually mature at around 6 months of age and are usually bred at 18 months. Their gestation period is around 5 months and they produce 1-2 kids each gestation (1, 2). The majority of goats are mated naturally (with one male serving 30-40 females). However, artificial insemination (AI) is becoming more common. The productive life of a dairy/fiber goat is 7 years (2).

Goats should be kept in accommodation which is dry underfoot with close attention given to the condition of the foot and, where necessary, regular trimming should be carried out to prevent lameness from overgrowth. Along with castration (these males are more generally accepted for meat



production and also more easily managed), goats may have to endure the mutilations of being disbudded and dehorning. Both of these must be carried out by a veterinary surgeon, disbudding being done at the earliest possible age (2-3 days) but no later than 10 days. Dehorning an adult goat is a very stressful procedure and should be avoided. The codes of recommendations for the welfare of goats permit goats over the age of 6 months to be tethered, as long as it does not cause distress or injury to them but the tethering of kids is not allowed (1).

Goat Milk

Sixty percent of goats are kept in small herds for house milk production (7). The main breeds are British Saanen, British Toggenburg, British Alpine and Anglo Nubian. British Saanen goats produce higher milk yields and are most commonly used commercially. Anglo Nubians produce a higher fat content. The average lactation length is around 9 months with average yields of 500 - 1,200 litres (7). Goats can milk through to 24 months but should be supported by adequate nutrition (1). In commercial dairy units, most kids (whether intended for meat or herd replacements) are taken from their mothers after receiving colostrum for 24 hours, then fed on milk replacer. Colostrum is the first milk that goats produce and contains essential antibodies, vitamins and minerals, and cannot be sold as regular milk for human consumption. When kids are artificially reared, they are weaned at around 6-8 weeks of age and should always have access to milk substitutes or be fed at least 2 or 3 times each day. (2). When unwanted kids are to be disposed of (slaughtered) on the farm, this must be done where possible by a person who is experienced in both the technique and the equipment used for slaughter (1). The choice of milking depends largely on the number of goats kept. Those who keep just a few will probably milk by hand compared to those with large herds, who will use a milking machine. About 75% of British goat milk produced goes for cheese making, much of which is sold through supermarkets and specialist food outlets (7). The practice of zero grazing is becoming more common as it is more convenient for the farmer. Animals are kept permanently confined, with no access to the outside, throughout their lives.

Goat Hair

Most goats have two coats, a course hairy outer/guard coat and a soft undercoat (cashmere). The angora goat on the other hand has a single coat (mohair), this is coarser than cashmere but produced in larger quantities. Cashmere is harvested by either shearing or combing whereas mohair is harvested by shearing (twice a year, spring and autumn) (7). There are around 50 cashmere producers in the UK with a herd of around 2,500 goats. Britain currently processes 60% of the world's mohair, almost all of which is imported. UK mohair production is currently around 25 tonnes per annum from a flock of between 4,000 - 6,000 animals. Shearing takes place twice a year in spring and autumn. In commercial flocks breeding stock would normally be culled after 6 years (7). Goats are particularly susceptible to changes in temperature, therefore, unless they are housed, they should only be shorn in suitable weather conditions. Combing is a preferred method in adverse weather conditions (1).

Disease

There is a large number of diseases affecting goats; these include Scrapie, Johnes' Disease, Caprine Arthritis Encephalitis Virus (CAEV), foot and mouth and mastitis in milking goats (1).

Scrapie

Scrapie is a fatal brain disease of sheep, and occasionally goats. The infection is thought to be caused by a protein called a prion. The way in which the disease is contracted and spread is not fully understood. The disease occurs in the UK and many other countries, with Australia and New Zealand being free of scrapie. The clinical signs include skin irritation, excitability, hind limb weakness and loss of condition which develops gradually months or years after the animal has become infected.

Johnes' disease

This is caused by a bacterium, *Mycobacterium avium* subspecies *paratuberculosis*, and affects adult



cattle, sheep and goats. The disease may also affect wildlife, such as deer and rabbits. Sheep and goats generally lose weight with no other clinical signs. Infection is usually picked up at an early age from the faeces of an infected dam mother, or from other infected adults in the birth and early rearing environment.

Caprine arthritis encephalitis virus (CAEV)

This is an incurable viral disease of goats which, as it progresses, causes severe welfare problems such as loss of body condition, arthritis and or/mastitis (5).

Foot and Mouth

This is an infectious disease caused by a virus (of which there are 7 types). The virus affects cloven-hoofed animals such as cattle, sheep, pigs, goats and deer. The disease is not normally fatal to adult animals but it does cause debilitation and loss of productivity for farmers (such as lameness). The virus causes a fever and the development of blisters, mostly in the mouth and on the feet. Animals contract the disease by either direct contact with an infected animal or contact with foodstuffs, etc. which have become contaminated by an infected animal.

Mastitis

This is an important disease in milking goats. Mastitis is a painful infection of the mammary gland (udder) caused mainly by bacteria such as streptococci, coliforms and staphylococci. Severe infections cause swelling of the udder, fever and sometimes death. Infection can lead to depressed appetite, dehydration and severe diarrhoea and can be fatal. Mastitis is commonly caused by poor hygiene in cubicle houses and milking parlours. When milk is extracted by a method known as vacuum pulsation, this means that tissue may be weakened and so more prone to infection. Over milking can also cause teat injuries leading to mastitis.

Slaughter

Goats live for 10-12 years, some as long as 30 years. In 2008, 9,526 goats were slaughtered in the UK (7,515 were slaughtered in 2007) (4). As most goat meat comes from kids, usually males which are surplus to the dairy herd, slaughter is carried out from the age of around 12 weeks old (2). In commercial flocks, breeding stock would normally be culled after 6 years (7). Unless destined for certain religious/ritual slaughter, goats are stunned first (percussively/electrically) to render them unconscious. The blood vessels in their throats are then cut (sticking) and the animal dies by loss of blood (8).

In percussive stunning a captive bolt pistol is held to the goats head so the bolt penetrates the skull and destroys the brain tissue. This should cause an instant loss of consciousness following collapse. If the brain tissue is not destroyed then the animal may come around. The use of a captive bolt does not always successfully stun the animal. The most common failure in stunning is due to improper positioning of the bolt, which is a particular problem where animals are agitated and struggling. Other problems may be due to inadequate maintenance of the pistol. Mis-stunning causes considerable distress and can mean the animal is still conscious during throat cutting. The period of unconsciousness induced by stunning should be longer than the period between stunning and sticking plus the time taken for sticking to induce brain death. When animals are stunned electrically, an electric current is applied by means of two electrodes in the form of tongs. These are placed on either side of the brain. The current should induce a state of immediate epilepsy (electroplectic shock) in the brain, during which time the animal is unconscious. Stunning may often be ineffective and animals may regain consciousness during bleeding-out or even before throat-slitting (8).

References & Useful Links

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Further Information - Any questions regarding this information sheet please contact Gilly Prime - Information and Research Officer gilly@vegsoc.org