



## Browser's Bulletin 43:

### The Geriatric Goat



Recently, I have been asked a few questions about goats that are getting a little long in the tooth (literally). I have done this Browser's Bulletin in a 'Question and Answer' format, listing a number of questions that I have been asked, that I thought others may be interested in too.

#### **Question 1:** [What is the lifespan of a goat?](#)

**Answer:** Goats lifespan is comparable to that of dogs (often they can reach 16-18 years of age). It is variable, depending on how productive the goat has been throughout its life. For instance, a high-yielding dairy goat is considered geriatric when they reach around 10-11 years.

#### **Question 2:** [When do goats stop having kids?](#)

**Answer:** This is also variable, does can continue to conceive as long as physiologically possible, providing they are in good body condition and free from debilitating conditions such as arthritis (Matthews). Productivity will gradually diminish with age, with the older does producing fewer offspring. Pregnant older does are more prone to pregnancy toxemia, so it is essential to monitor feed intake and ensure regular exercise.

#### **Question 3:** [I have an older doe and it looks like her udder has dropped, what has happened?](#)



**Answer:** Some does that have had multiple pregnancies can lead to stretching and a rupture of the ventral abdominal muscles which will drop the udder, so it sits lower to the ground. This rupture of the ventral abdominal muscles can also occur from trauma. Most ventral abdominal muscle ruptures in older does occur in late pregnancy due to increased intra-abdominal pressure weakening the muscles and the tendinous support of the abdominal wall. Manual, medical and/or surgical intervention at parturition is usually necessary and surgical correction after kidding is warranted but often not practical. A ventral abdominal muscle hernia can lead to trapped and strangulated sections of gut. These does should never be bred with again and due to increased chance of gut strangulation, euthanasia is usually recommended.

#### **Question 4:** [Why does my old goat looks thin across the back but has a fat abdomen?](#)

**Answer:** As the goat gets older it changes in shape and loses muscle mass. The Body Condition scoring charts are designed for animals during their productive years. You will notice as your goats become older, they will lose condition over their topline. It is important to make sure the older goats are getting enough food as the younger, stronger goats may be bullying them out of the way. Also, if they have developed arthritis, they will have greater difficulty getting to their food and water. As goats get older, they lose weight, muscle mass, hair loss and slower metabolism making them more susceptible to extremes in the weather.

An enlarged abdomen in an older goat can be that she is overweight due to lack of exercise, lowered metabolism but eating the same amount of feed. This can be deceiving with the loss of condition across the topline. Other causes of an enlarged abdomen include dropped stomach (ventral hernia), pregnancy, false pregnancy, ovarian and abdominal tumours and liver and cardiac failure.

#### **Question 5:** [My goat has lost a few teeth, is this a problem?](#)

**Answer:** Dental disease and tooth loss may impair the goats ability to masticate their food. It is important to do a dental examination on a regular basis. As the goat ages, the incisor (front) teeth become elongated, rounded and start to slant forward and with time they can become loose and drop out. It is difficult to examine the cheek (molar) teeth as the mouth of a goat is very narrow and sharp. Overtime the cheek teeth can develop sharp points which can cause laceration of the cheeks or tongue and extreme discomfort in the mouth. You may notice the goat holding the head on one side, chewing on one side of the mouth, dropping

food out of the mouth, cud between the cheek and the teeth and a foul smell coming from the mouth. Oral tumours and tooth root abscesses may also cause issues in older goats.



If you are noticing issues with your goats' mouth, then you will need to contact your private veterinarian. Carefully examine the molar teeth almost always requires sedation and the use of a gag with a light source to facilitate the examination. Old goats generally cope well with the loss of a few incisors, without significant issues while eating. If they lose cheek teeth, then the opposing tooth will grow long due to the lack of wear and food may accumulate in the empty socket. If your goat does appear to be losing weight, it could be to do with their teeth. The diet may need to be altered to be higher in quality, easily digested with adequate fibre. Roughage is essential for rumen function, but the hay stem may need to be cut shorter in order to make it easier to chew.

**Question 6:** As the nights are getting cooler, I have noticed my old goat hobbling around. Do goats develop arthritis?

**Answer:** Most old goats will develop arthritis; this will be ranging from slight stiffness on rising to severe debilitating lameness with the inability to rise. It is important to not forget about the possibility of the virus Caprine Arthritis Encephalitis, which is we see occasionally in the dairy breed (sometimes other breeds) of goats in Australia and can be the cause of arthritis. Osteoarthritis is the most common cause of lameness in old goats.

To assist your arthritic goat, it is important to regularly trim the goat's hooves and maintain a good weight, as excessive weight will exacerbate the arthritis. Regular exercise will also assist with pain management. When the arthritis gets worse, it is important to contact your private vet to provide some pain management medication.

**Question 7:** I have an old doe who has definitely not been with a buck and who has been occasionally bleeding from the vulva. What do you think is going on?

**Answer:** Bleeding from the vulva in old does is commonly a uterine tumour. Sometimes the tumour will grow in the pelvic inlet and this will cause straining like the doe is in labour or they can even obstruct the urethra and result in a distended bladder. Often a mass can be detected with abdominal palpation and veterinary investigation is required.

If you have other questions and concerns about geriatric goats, please send me an email on [kylie.greentree@lls.nsw.gov.au](mailto:kylie.greentree@lls.nsw.gov.au)

References:

- Matthews, J; 2009. Diseases of the Goat

© State of New South Wales through Local Land Services 2019. The information contained in this publication is based on knowledge and understanding at the time of writing November 2019. However, because of advances in knowledge, users are reminded of the need to ensure that the information upon which they rely is up to date and to check the currency of the information with the appropriate officer of Local Land Services or the user's independent adviser. For updates go to [www.lls.nsw.gov.au](http://www.lls.nsw.gov.au)