

Our Experiences with Fescue Toxicity

By Maggie Leman

It seems the only decent hay we can get is either fescue or a fescue mix, unless, of course, we wish to go out of the state to buy hay. Our own pasture actually has very little fescue growing in it but it doesn't come close to providing what our herd needs. So we feed what we can get and deal with the consequences.

Pregnancy-related problems in goats eating tall fescue are very similar to those of other species. Problems include:

- 1) Does passing their kidding due dates by as much as ten days or even more.
- 2) Does with little or no milk. Some does never develop an udder.
- 3) Contractions so weak that the doe requires human assistance in delivering her kids.
- 4) Placentas so thick that the kids cannot get out unless the producer tears it open.
- 5) Unusually thick umbilical cords that are tough to break.
- 6) No cervical dilation at all in some does.
- 7) Kids are too large, probably because of prolonged gestation, requiring producer intervention to deliver them alive.

Young goats eating tall fescue often have very reduced weight gain and growth. Rough coats are typical. Poor blood circulation causes a condition called dry gangrene in which parts of the hooves and tail rot and fall off. Body temperatures tend to be slightly higher than normal, resulting in animals spending much time standing around in the shade when they should be out foraging.

There are others that can be particularly troublesome to pygmy goat breeders. Reduced fertility can spell trouble for a species that is supposed to produce twins or better. We see many more single births when feeding fescue. We also have many more does that have trouble getting pregnant. This combined with prolonged gestation is a disaster waiting to happen with many pygmies. A doe that is carrying just one kid is liable to have a large kid even if she kids right on her due date. But let her go over her date by 5 to 7 days and she is essentially giving birth to a week old kid!

While we haven't had a doe kid with no milk we have seen does with exceptionally thick colostrum. A kid can suck and suck and just get drops. Many goat keepers never check the colostrum. They see a kid suckling vigorously never knowing that in a few hours to a couple of days the kid will die of starvation or dehydration. Some goat keepers will milk this thick colostrum out and tube it to the kids. This is good but without adding some form of fluids the kid will become dehydrated and constipated from the too thick colostrum.

Not all does in the herd will have problems; so many goat keepers don't know that those seemingly random reproductive problems have the same cause. Many goatkeepers get used to their does producing an abundance of singles, or taking several breedings to catch. They assume that pygmies are supposed to be troublesome kidders. This is not so!

After several years of dealing with various problems that we were pretty sure were related to feeding fescue we were lucky enough to get enough orchard grass hay to feed through the breeding and kidding season. WOW what a difference! Most of the does caught on the first try. We had very few 5 day heats. They tended to all kid on day 145 to 147 and none went over day 150. Triplets became nearly the norm and they were all born quickly and easily. The does had MUCHO milk, plenty to share with me and plenty to feed their kids. That was the year we had 2 sets of quads!

Unfortunately the problems soon returned when that source was gone. The best we could do was an orchard grass/fescue mix. So there is no doubt in our minds that goats are definitely affected by fescue toxicity.

We now have a good reliable source of orchard grass and have vowed to NEVER FEED FESCUE. So if you are having kidding or fertility problems you may want to look at your hay or the grass in your pastures. While good hay can be hard to find you may wish to double your efforts.