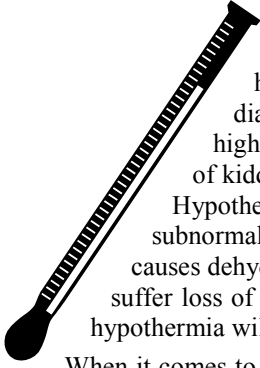


Taking Your Goat's Temperature

By Dr. Virgil Fleming



No single diagnostic tool is more important than a thermometer. A thermometer? That's right, a thermometer. Have you ever noticed that regardless of the reason you visit your medical doctor, you will have your temperature taken prior to seeing the doctor? It's for a good reason! Your temperature helps him diagnose your condition. Before you contact a veterinarian about your goat, it pays to know its temperature. A high fever is usually indicative of some type of infection or dehydration. In female goats that are within two weeks of kidding (before or after), they may have a subnormal temperature that could indicate Milk Fever (hypocalcemia). Hypothermia also causes subnormal temperatures (over exposure in cold or wet weather). In both elevated and subnormal temperatures, medical attention is critically important. A high fever destroys healthy gastrointestinal bacteria, causes dehydration, and may result in organ failure and/or permanent brain damage and death. A doe with Milk Fever will suffer loss of control of her rear legs, eventually going and remaining down, going into a coma and dying. Any goat with hypothermia will die if left untreated.

When it comes to diagnosing goats, it pays to know a couple of things. First, you must know that a perfectly healthy goat will have a temperature of 102 to 103 degrees Fahrenheit (plus or minus a half degree). Second, their temperatures fluctuate during the course of a day - rising a nominal amount during the heat of the day. The goat owner who keeps health records on his or her goats would be wise to document each animal's normal, healthy temperature.

To take a goat's temperature is as simple as taking a human baby's temperature - it's done rectally. Livestock supply companies offer both digital and traditional glass thermometers that range in price from \$3 to \$6. The glass thermometers have a convenient loop in the external end for attaching a string - yes, you could accidentally insert it to the point of losing it.

For baby goats, the most comfortable position for the kid is to simply lay them across your lap. Never force a thermometer into a goat - it should slide easily when lubricated. Lubricating the probe end with KY Jelly, mineral oil, or petroleum jelly will help ease insertion into the rectum. The thermometer should be inserted to half its length (about 1.5 to 2.5 inches) and held in place for a minimum of two minutes. Digital thermometers will sound an alarm when done.

For larger kids, it's helpful to have someone else hold the goat in a standing or reclined position while you take its temperature. For adult goats, especially ones that are not very tame, it may be easier to secure them with a collar and rope to a gatepost - even then, you may need someone to help steady them until you insert the thermometer and obtain a reading.

A thermometer should be cleaned with an alcohol wipe after each use and secured in its case. Never use a dirty thermometer - even if several goats appear to be suffering from the same problem. Don't make the mistake of inserting a dirty rectal thermometer into a doe's vagina. Thermometers should be stored at room temperature. Glass thermometers have to be "shaken down" before or after each use. To do this, get a firm grip on the thermometer and shake it in a slinging fashion - as if you're trying to get the red alcohol or mercury inside to get back down into the bulb (because that's exactly what you're doing!). Digital thermometers have to be reset according to the manufacturer's instructions.

Over the years, I've heard many people say that goats get sick and die quickly, implying that they're not very hardy animals. Quite to the contrary, goats are generally so hardy that it's hard to tell they're sick until they're very sick. For this reason, it pays to know your goats well and to check them daily. Oftentimes, goats that don't feel well will droop their tails or have a depressed appearance. It's at these times that it pays to take their temperature - tomorrow may be too late.

If your goat's temperature is high, your vet may prescribe the injectable product Banamine to reduce the fever and pain. Goats can also be given liquid Children's Motrin at 1 cc per 10 pounds every 6 to 8 hours as needed. It's one thing to treat a high temperature, but it's imperative that you find out what's causing the fever. A common cause of high temperatures is respiratory infections (sometimes pneumonia). If you expect to save your goat, you must treat both the temperature and the infection. Some antibiotics are available over-the-counter from livestock or goat supply stores - the most commonly used products being oxytetracycline and penicillin. Some causes of infection must be treated with more expensive prescription antibiotics such as Nuflor or Naxcel. It's best to consult your vet for the right product and dosage rather than to experiment.

No article on taking a goat's temperature would be complete without mentioning two more things. First, high fevers lead to dehydration. It's important to administer electrolytes to keep the goat hydrated. A goat that is down and unable to drink may require the intravenous administration of fluids. Second, a kid with high fever should be taken off milk until its fever is under control -- until such time, keep the kid hydrated with electrolytes. Electrolytes are important for organ and muscle function, blood flow, and the elimination of fluid waste.