Your Guide to Raising Healthy Kids

Q & A with Kat Drovdahl and More!

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Katherine Drovdahl MH CR CA CEIT DipHir QTP answers questions about natural goat health in Kat’s Caprine Corner, within each issue of Goat Journal.

Health Questions About Kid Goats

From Kat’s Caprine Corner

Q: How would I know if my kid is premature?

A: There are a few things I watch for in my herd that indicate I may have a preemie on my hands: Any kidding before about 140 days gestation. Kids that do not have leg integrity, making it impossible to stand, those that lack a suck reflex, have eyelids that are still sealed, and/or are having lung problems. You can also have a kid that urinates through their umbilicus. Preemies may have trouble regulating their body temperatures (staying warm) so should be blanketed. Their teeth also should have erupted through their gums. Of course, some of these can indicate other problems as well, so I consider these along with the length of gestation or number of kids in the litter showing the same signs.

Q: I have one kid that seems premature, but the others are obviously full term. Is this possible?

A: It is possible to have kids from two different breedings, about three weeks apart, born together and giving you a mix of full term and preemie kids. Always record every breeding even if you think the earlier one(s) didn’t take.

Q: My preemie kid can’t stand on her own. Should I be doing anything for her?

A: Absolutely. I would separate her from the other kids, who could smother her if they lie on her, and prop her upright between two or three rolled bath towels. I would also lift her several times per day and hold her up with her feet just on the ground to help her develop leg and muscle strength. Consider putting her on herbs such as nettle and dandelion (or Fir Meadow’s ReBuild herb mix) in tiny-pinch doses with her bottle, to feed her muscles.
Q: My premature kid has one eyelid that still seems attached together. Is there anything I can do to help it detach and open?

A: In that situation, I have taken a warm, soft, clean, moist washcloth and gently soaked the area. One can also take an olive-oil based herbal salve, or pure olive oil, and place it ½ inch below the sealed eyelid. The body will draw it toward the eyelid.

Q: How often should I feed my premature kid?

A: The first day I would offer him milk every hour, if he can nurse, and let him drink until his tummy feels like a full water balloon. You can monitor his intake by feeling his tummy for roundness and tightness. If he’s unable to nurse or doesn’t have enough strength to nurse, you may have to feed him through a stomach tube. Your goat mentor or veterinarian can teach you how to do this without putting his lungs at risk. After the first day, if he is gaining strength, you can start spacing more time between feedings. To help him gain endurance faster, you can also add a teeny pinch of 40,000-heat-unit cayenne to each feeding.

Q: How do I know how much colostrum my kid needs and for how long?

A: When kids are born, perforations in their intestines allow antibodies from colostrum to pass into the bloodstream. These perforations start closing at about 12 hours of age, with completion at about 24 hours. Some kids may take as long as 48 hours to seal up. So my goal is to get several good colostrum feedings into our kids by the time they are 12 hours old, with continued colostrum feeding through 48 hours of age. Kids should have a minimum of one ounce per pound of kid, that first 12 hours. So an eight-pound kid would ideally drink at least eight ounces of colostrum that first 12 hours. Having said this, my kids usually drink at least double and some triple that amount. I also will get up in the middle of the night, if needed, to give the 11-hour-old kids another good colostrum feeding to be sure they are topped off for a good start on life before they turn 12 hours.

Q: How do I know how much colostrum my kid needs and for how long?

A: We freeze excess colostrum, either double bagged in freezer bags or in small plastic juice containers. Glass is ideal for storage, but you also have to consider the risk of breakage; my floors are tile and concrete, so we opt for plastic. We label them with the doe’s name, which milking (first, second, third), and the date. We leave plenty of headspace room and put it in the freezer. We can store them for up to 18 months to keep some as backup for the next year’s kidding season. We also sell excess to alpaca breeders and others who need a backup source. To thaw, I set them in a bowl to catch any possible leakage in case the container has a hole or split in it.
**Q: How do you know when it’s time to wean a kid?**

**A:** Some farms, for efficiency or milk needs, will wean their kids at eight weeks of age, and I’ve even heard of younger. To really give them a good start on life, we prefer they drink milk until they are at least four months old. I will often keep late-born kids (after mid-April), or kids that had a setback, on longer. In years we have excess milk, I’ll even keep them on a once-a-day feeding into the fall and monitor that they are not getting too fat, so they still receive valuable nutrients and fats important for body, organ, and brain development. If I weren’t feeding them milk then I would have to start them on grain and it’s more cost effective for me to keep them on excess milk. I also like to use herb blends with my kids for their wellness, including their dewormers, and the most efficient way for me to feed those is to mix powders with their milk. Consider whether the kids are growing well (10 to sometimes even 18 lbs. per month), and have skin that moves easily over their ribs when rubbed, indicating a small fat layer between the skin and ribs. Do they have glossy coats, clear bright eyes, and clean noses? Do they have exuberant amounts of energy? Are they eating their hay and drinking fresh water well? You have to decide for yourself what is going to work for you, but this should give you some things to ponder so you can make a good decision for your kids.

**Q: When should I start feeding my kids grain?**

**A:** I like to start my kids on grain a month before I plan to wean them. I start with just a small handful or about 1/8 cup per standard goat breed kid. If the kids are younger than three months old, then I’d start with even less. Every week I increase it by another 1/8 cup per kid until I have them at the amount I want them on for winter. The slow increase gives the flora in their rumens and intestines time to adjust to the new feeds so that we may avoid acidosis or worse yet: enterotoxemia, which is life-threatening.

**Q: When should kids start eating hay and drinking fresh water?**

**A:** Our kids will often start pulling hay and exploring water once we get them in the barn at four or five days of age, so we keep it out for them right away.
Q: When should I start trimming feet on my kids and how often should I trim them?

A: I usually start trimming feet on my kids at four to six weeks of age, and then monthly thereafter, to keep proper hoof and pastern angles on their quickly growing feet and legs. My does and bucks are trimmed monthly as well.

Q: When should I consider parasite programs for my kids?

A: Part of that depends on your kids’ exposure to goat manure and places where goats have lived in the last year. Since our kids go into stalls that previously housed last year’s kids and, until recently, housed does, we start our kids as soon as we put them in the barn. No matter how clean your kid facilities are, if they have been used, there will still be oocysts (eggs) from the coccidia and other parasites that they can lick or ingest. In the world of chemical dewormers, it is good to wait until kids are older (at least three weeks), unless a vet advises differently, before their livers and bodies are hit with toxins. Because I use herb blends that don’t harm my kids, but that the parasites can’t handle, I start mixing the herbs in their milk as soon as they are in the barn. That way, I am helping their bodies way before parasites begin laying eggs and damaging the GI tract. Remember that any livestock with parasites are probably re-infecting themselves on a daily basis, meaning that they will have every age and stage of parasite maturation in them. I prefer to try to keep those cycles broken and, with herbs, it’s safe. If using a chemical program, please build that program with a very experienced local breeder that has goats that are healthy-looking and correct weight, or with a local veterinarian. Overuse of chemicals will make parasites immune to them and will damage kids’ health by overuse.

Q: What kind of fencing is best for kids?

A: The best fencing is always a balance between what is ideal, what will handle the weather the best, and what one can afford. The ideal fencing is strong, safe and with a small-diameter grid pattern so kids can’t get heads caught or crawl through (or have coyotes get in with them). For kids, I prefer to have pens of horse panels: 16 feet long and about five feet tall with a 4-inch grid pattern. These handle the abuse that the kids will give them and safely keep them in. Cut into 4-foot or other-sized sections; they make wonderful inexpensive goat gates if you add double-ended snaps for the gate side and fence staples to secure them to a post in a way allowing it to swing open. Fence panels can also be bent to go around a post corner. One can also use non-climb woven fencing, which comes in 100-foot lengths and in 4-, 5-, and 6-foot heights. The weave pattern has 2-inch by 6-inch openings and is very safe for kids and goats. The woven wire means it is tied or knotted, rather than welded at the joints for each square/rectangle. Welded wires will break under stress, leaving dangerous sharp wires that can puncture your beloved creatures, so shouldn’t be used with livestock. Woven wire may have to be replaced in high-use areas where the goats will be climbing on the fencing, so I prefer to use horse panels near gates or areas where the kids will want to climb the fence to say ‘hi.’ Young goat kids can climb through cattle panels and field fencing, so I don’t use those with my kid pens, even though those choices are less expensive. Since another of my goals when building fence is to hopefully never have to build it again, I avoid wood railing and plywood types of fencing.
Q: How do I know when buck kids are old enough to be separated from their dam or other does?

A: I believe most of us have heard stories of buck kids being able to breed at a very young age — even as young as two months old. While that is not the norm, it does alert us to start watching them at a younger age than most of us would think to look. The easiest way to deal with this, if you hand raise kids, is to just be ready to separate your doe kids from your bucklings by the time they hit a month of age. But if you are unable to do that, here are some signs to watch for to prevent accidental breedings: I watch for a beard starting to grow, for interest in the does’ vulval areas or his urine, and for any activity in which he shows that he can extend his penis beyond its sheath. The first two indicate that testosterone is alive and well and maturing the bucklings into bucky boys. Sheath extension is not physically possible in a young buckling; they have to mature into that ability which allows them to impregnate a doe. Now is a great time to be planning where to put a separate pen for those active bucklings, if you don’t have one yet.

Q: When can I start turning out my doelings with my milker herd?

A: If you have enough space and feeders in your doe barn, you keep up on your parasite program and your doelings are healthy, I suggest that you can start putting them into your doe pen during the day at about two months of age. Do make sure that the doelings have indoor places where they can get away from any aggressive does, and supervise the first few times you place them there. Ours will sleep under the hay feeders, which are too small for the does to get under to bother them. After a week of daytimes, they can stay with the does full time, except for feeding time if they are still on a lambar. We set up a temporary pen in the doe barn for milk feeding time.

Q: One of my bucklings has crooked legs. What should I do?

A: Crooked legs come from many causes. We had to pull on one buckling so hard this year, due to his size, that we caused additional stress to his front pasterns and he couldn’t keep them in position to stand. In that case, we splinted them with two toilet paper rolls and some duct tape. We cut the rolls lengthwise, held them over the leg from the hoof to under the knee, and tightened them. We made sure we could still have a pencil’s space of room in them to not cause tendon or circulation damage. Then we taped under the foot to both sides — this is the piece that holds it on. After three days, he didn’t need it anymore. Some kids are born with crooked legs due to the limited space in the womb. You frequently see this in long-legged livestock. Usually, those will correct themselves within two weeks. If they need help walking, you can splint them as already mentioned. Some kids are attached wrong at the joints or over at the knee. Incorrect attachments won’t change and while some over at the knees will straighten out, some will not. Those have to be watched. Giving nutritional supplements can also help some of those out.

Q: We have a doe with three 8-day-old bucklings. The yearlings are being aggressive with the kids and I’m afraid they may hurt them. Should I take them out?

A: You are risking injury to your kids from mild to serious, and I would not be running the aggressive yearlings with the kids and their dam. The dam, if she’s a good mom, will get worn down trying to protect her kids at a time when she is supposed to be recovering from kidding. Even her immune system is recovering right now and the body acidity created from stress will keep her system stalled out longer, allowing parasites or other issues an easier time to take advantage of her. Also, the kids can sustain mild to serious injuries (broken bones, internal damage) if allowed to be chased or hit by yearlings that finally have some goats lower in status than themselves to pick on. We typically start introducing our kids to the herd in graduated amounts of time once they hit about two months of age. Our kids also have places under feeders where they can hide from goats if a yearling milker starts to get aggressive with them.
Tube Feeding a Weak Kid

Buttercup, a three-year-old Oberian doe, unexpectedly went into labor before the calendar indicated she should. Upon checking dates, I discovered that my farm partner and I had different breeding dates. She was at either 140 or 145 days gestation. That would make the kids either premature or just on the cusp of maturity. Still, it didn’t occur to me that there might be a problem with the babies.

The labor was normal and uneventful and, around 10 p.m., Buttercup delivered a little doeling, then a buckling and then a stillborn doeling. The problems began with the first kid, who was in respiratory distress and was having trouble getting a breath. Her tongue was hanging out, and despite stimulation by both Buttercup and me, she was very weak. Her brother followed suit, and despite swinging and removing mucus with a bulb syringe, neither of the living kids could stand up. They were floppy, weak and had no sucking ability.

This was one of those times that I had to pull out my book, *Goat Health Care*, to relearn how to use a stomach tube to give them some warm colostrum. If they were mature enough, it would be the only chance they had to survive. Anyone who raises goats is wise to include a tube and syringe designed for such feeding in their birth kit to give weak or sick kids a fighting chance.

You can purchase a flexible rubber feeding tube, along with a 60 ml syringe and an irrigation tip, for $5 or less at most veterinary supply stores or from a veterinarian. The tube has a tapered end, which attaches to the syringe. The cost is minimal, compared to paying a veterinarian; and while it seems scary to tube feed, it really isn’t that hard.

The biggest fear that people have about tube feeding is that they will accidentally get liquid into the goat’s lungs. Although you need to be careful, it is much easier to get the tube into the stomach than into the lungs, and there are several ways to check to make sure it isn’t in the lungs before you add milk or colostrum.

To determine how far to insert the tube, measure from the kid’s nose to the center of the ear base. Then measure from the ear to the chest floor and mark the feeding tube with the sum of those two measurements. That mark is how far the tube must be inserted into the kid’s mouth. (If the tube cannot be
inserted that far, it is the first sign that it is in the windpipe [trachea] rather than the stomach.)

Although tube feeding can be done by one person, having a second person to hold the kid is better. Some kids (like Buttercup’s kids) are too weak to even fight back, but others may have more spirit but yet be unable to suck.

To tube feed, hold (or have someone hold) the kid on your lap and tilt its head back slightly so the tube has a straighter path to follow. Open the kid’s mouth a little by pressing on one side of the jaw with your fingers. Take the softened tube and slowly slide it down the kid’s throat, small end first. If it does not go as far as the mark, slowly pull it out and start over. (I have never had this happen.)

If the kid was crying before the tube was inserted and suddenly stops during the process, slowly pull the tube out and start again.

Putting one hand on the front of the kid’s throat will help you feel when the tube enters the esophagus. When the mark on the tube is at the opening of the kid’s mouth, you are there.

There are several methods for checking to ensure that the tube is in the right place. The first is smelling the end of the tube for a milk smell coming from the stomach. I didn’t use this method in the case of Buttercup’s kids because they were just born and had no milk in their stomachs.

The second method is to place the end of the tube into a cup of water. If bubbles come out, the tube is in the lungs. I have done this, but it can be unwieldy, especially if you are working alone.

The third method is to blow gently into the tube to see whether the lungs inflate. I have not tried this method, in part because I have concerns about blowing too hard into fragile newborn lungs.

I chose the fourth method: Listen at the end of the tube for little crackles that are the sounds of breath. I heard no sounds so I was ready for the feeding.

After determining that the tube is correctly placed, you are ready to feed. Attach the 60 ml syringe to the feeding tube. Use your 6 ml syringe filled with warm water to add water to the syringe to ensure that it goes down properly and is not twisted. If everything seems fine, pour the colostrum or milk into the tube while holding it up higher than the kid. (The plunger is not needed for this procedure because gravity will pull the milk down.)

After the milk or colostrum is gone, add another 6 ml more water to rinse the syringe. This step is not essential, but can help prevent milk or colostrum from going into the lungs while removing the tube, if some is left in the syringe or tube. Then withdraw the tube slowly, but in one smooth motion.

In some cases, you will see a striking difference in the kid. It may stand up within minutes and even show interest in nursing shortly afterward. In others, you may need to do several such feedings before the kid develops the necessary strength.

In the case of Buttercup’s kids, their prematurity made life impossible and the tube feeding had no effect. Their lungs were not developed enough for them to survive without more treatment than an average goatkeeper like me can provide.

I try to take something good from every experience with my goats. In this case I learned that I can tube feed (I hadn’t had to do so for at least six years) without hurting the kid, and I was reminded that on the homestead, you are never far from new life or death.

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**TUBE FEEDING SUPPLIES**

- Feeding tube, warmed with hot water to soften
- 60 ml syringe with irrigation tip
- Colostrum or milk
- Warm water
- 6 ml syringe

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Kidding season was a great success and your goats — both moms and kids — are healthy and happy. The barn is a little more crowded than usual and it’s harder to keep it clean. Then, two to five months in (around weaning time), a kid develops diarrhea, seemingly overnight. You get that under control with a little kaolin pectin or probiotics and slippery elm, and then another develops it. Soon, if the culprit is not found, most of the kids develop diarrhea. Then, the worst happens — several kids suddenly die. What now?

Assuming that the problems are caused by intestinal worms, some goat-keepers will deworm their herd. However, the thinking on that has changed over the years due to development of resistance by worms to various anthelmintics (dewormers). If you haven’t done so already, it’s time to get a fecal sample to find out the cause of the problem and then treat it.

For only about $100, you can get a microscope and slides to run your own fecals, and pay for it all in the first year by not purchasing the dewormers and anticoccidials that you may have been giving willy-nilly. You won’t have to wait to contact a vet or send the results to a lab for evaluation. You can even make your own flotation solution from salt or sugar.

Once a fecal test is run, you may learn that the culprit is not worms but coccidiosis. Coccidiosis is an intestinal disease caused by a protozoan in the genus Eimeria. These one-celled creatures are host-specific, which means that goats cannot get them from chickens, dogs, horses or any other animal. (There may be some crossover in certain Eimeria species between sheep and goats.)

These critters are normally present in goats, and their environment. Only when they overpopulate and get out of control are they a problem. The protozoa attach to and destroy the lining of the intestine, as well as interacting with
How is Coccidiosis Spread?

Does that are infected at kidding may contaminate the area with oocysts that are released due to stress of kidding. Young kids that live in these areas are then at risk. Other stresses, such as moving to a new farm, feed changes or additions, overcrowding, or a drop in temperature, may be all it takes for a problem such as diarrhea to develop.

Kids are notorious for tasting things, so feeding on the ground is a good way to spread the disease. Illness can occur from five to 13 days after eating coccidia in feces. The main sign is diarrhea which may contain mucus or blood, dehydration, emaciation, weakness, loss of appetite and, ultimately, death. To make diagnosis even more difficult, some goats develop constipation and die without ever getting diarrhea.

Infection with Eimeria affects the lining of the intestine, which can cause pain and blood loss. A goat that recovers may still have ulceration and scarring of the intestine, leading to stunted growth caused by malabsorption. In worst case scenarios, the goat may even develop liver failure.

A clinical diagnosis of coccidiosis is based on the number of oocysts found in feces that are examined under the microscope. The numbers of oocysts can be phenomenal, from tens of thousands to millions per gram of feces. In kids with loss of appetite and failure to gain weight, numbers may still be high with no diarrhea. Suspect coccidiosis in thin, unthrifty goats that are not growing properly, even if you see no diarrhea.

How is it Treated?

Treat early to reduce the severity of the disease process. Sulfa drugs, such as sulfamethoxazole and sulfadimethoxine (Albon), and amprolium (Cord), available over-the-counter, are used to treat coccidiosis. Merck Manual (available from the Countryside Bookstore) states that amprolium has poor activity against certain species of Eimeria, so it may not be the best choice. In addition, it can lead to thiamine deficiency (also known as polioencephalomalacia) — so injections of thiamine or fortified vitamin B may be required at the same time.

Treatment with these two classes of drugs is usually five days long, as an oral drench. You also need to ensure that a kid with coccidiosis is well-hydrated because diarrhea can lead to dehydration. Keep treating for the full course, even if the kid improves in the first few days.

Veterinarians are now recommending a drug called toltrazuril, which only must be given one time, and works on the whole life span of the protozoa. This is in contrast to amprolium and monensin, which is effective during the early stages, and sulfa drugs, which are effective in later stages. The dose for goats is two times that for sheep or cattle.

Other Suggestions for Avoiding Problems

- Clean kidding pens between does.
- Keep kid pens or other areas as clean and dry as possible.
- Make sure to change food and water that may have gotten contaminated with feces.
- Cover hay, mineral feeders, or mineral blocks that kids might be likely to jump on.
- Clip does’ udders prior to kidding, if kids will be nursing.
- Never feed goats on the ground.
- Control flies, which can carry coccidia from place to place.
- If you are bottle-raising kids, consider separating them from the adults in clean pens.
- Muck your barn frequently, or remove manure as much as possible.
Other Thoughts
Some goat breeders use the “wet tail” method for determining when to treat for coccidiosis. With this method, whenever a kid (particularly post-weaning) has a tail that indicates loose, watery stool, they treat. One of the reasons I like the sulfa drugs for treatment is that they are also effective against some bacterial diarrheas.

Ideally, goat owners will do a fecal exam as soon as they notice the slightest problem, so they can determine what organism — if any — is causing the problem. Other possible causes include giardia, enterotoxemia, salmonella and many others.

One option is to treat with an antidiarrheal product such as Pepto-Bismol or kaolin pectin when a goat develops diarrhea, to see whether you can get it under control without the use of harsh medicines and while awaiting fecal exam results.

For those who prefer herbal treatments and prevention, tannin-containing plants — such as pine needles and oak leaves — were found in a Korean study to decrease coccidia egg counts.

Also important is that having spotlessly clean pens may lead to more clinical coccidiosis in kids, because they need some exposure to get immunized to the effects of the coccidia. Finally, overuse of anticoccidial medications can, like with other intestinal parasites, lead to resistance and eventually will not work.

Anyone who is raising more than a few goats — especially if they are kidding, showing or otherwise exposed to stressors — may eventually have to deal with coccidiosis. Being prepared, knowing what to expect and acting quickly can keep those goats healthy and save lives.

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About the Author
Cheryl K. Smith is a freelance writer who has raised miniature dairy goats, under the herd name Mystic Acres, in the foothills of the Coast Range in Oregon since 1998. She is the author of Goat Health Care (karmadillo Press, 2009) and Raising Goats for Dummies (Wiley, 2010).
Backyard Homesteading addresses the needs of many people who want to take control of the food they eat and the products they use — even if they live in an urban or suburban house on a typical-size lot. It shows homeowners how to turn their yard into a productive and wholesome “homestead” that allows them to grow their own fruits and vegetables, and raise farm animals, including chickens and goats. Backyard Homesteading covers the laws and regulations of raising livestock in populated areas and demonstrates to readers how to use and preserve the bounty they produce.

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