



An introduction to goat keeping

YOUR GUIDE TO KEEPING GOATS
HAPPY AND HEALTHY



Animal Welfare Foundation

www.bva-awf.org.uk

AWF is the charity led by the veterinary profession

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An introduction to goat keeping

Goats are curious animals that often enjoy human company and can make friendly and rewarding pets. They need daily care and require a high level of commitment, so you will need to think carefully about all aspects of goat keeping before deciding to choose them as pets.

This leaflet, produced by the Animal Welfare Foundation, aims to provide those new to goat keeping with basic guidance to ensure that any goats for which they are responsible remain healthy and happy. Under the Animal Welfare Act 2006, goat owners in England and Wales have a legal duty of care towards their goats. This leaflet will help goat keepers understand what this means for them and the care they must provide.

In broad terms, the legal duty of care states that the following welfare needs must be met for any animals kept as pets:

- The need for a suitable environment
- The need for a suitable diet
- The need to exhibit normal behaviour patterns
- The need to be housed with, or apart from, other animals
- The need to be protected from pain, suffering, injury and disease.



What facilities do I need?

Goats are social animals and any intention to keep them must allow for at least two to be kept together. Each goat should be provided with at least a quarter of an acre of space.

A fenced-off area of a large garden, or a small field or paddock is essential. You also need to provide dry, well ventilated accommodation as goats do not like getting wet.

This is because, unlike sheep which produce an oily secretion called lanolin into their wool, goats have no natural waterproofing.

Goats explore everything by nibbling and chewing and this can include fixtures and fittings, such as electric cables, so these should be kept out of reach — remember, a goat can reach up to two metres on its hind legs. Some garden plants, shrubs and trees (such as rhododendron, pieris and yew) are poisonous to goats and will need to be fenced off.

The fencing must be very strong, as your goats will always be trying to reach what is on the other side. Goats are skilled at opening doors and gates with their mouths — so make sure catches are goat-proof.

Goats naturally like to climb and explore, so objects such as wooden benches, logs and large tyres should be used to enrich their living space.

It is advisable to ask your vet to look over these facilities for you before your goats arrive.

Where can I find the right goat for me?

Although goats are occasionally advertised in local newspapers or smallholder magazines, it is worth making contact with a local goat club, whose members will usually be more than happy to offer advice.

The British Goat Society (BGS) has a list of local clubs and contacts throughout the UK.

What breed of goat should I choose?

There are a variety of breeds of goat, each with different physical and behavioural characteristics. It is advisable to seek advice before deciding which breed of goat is most suitable for you.

For example, if you are a prospective owner with limited space, consider a small breed such as the Pygmy goat. A dairy goat such as a Saanen will need milking twice each day if it is lactating, so you will need to have the time and resource to do this. Uncastrated (entire) male goats can be difficult to handle, and display some undesirable characteristics—they do not make good pets. Males that have been castrated before they reach sexual maturity (wethers) can however make very good pets.

Hornless goats make better pets than those with horns. Horns can be used to injure other goats, injure other livestock kept with them or cause injury to an inexperienced owner, with small children being particularly at risk even from harmless play-fighting. Horns may also make the goats more prone to getting caught in fences or hedges as they follow their normal browsing behaviour. Horned and hornless goats should never be kept together. Some goat breeds are naturally hornless, so it is preferable to keep these as pets. In other breeds, disbudding (removing the growing horns) can be performed, but this should only ever be done by a competent veterinary surgeon with appropriate local anaesthesia and adequate pain relief.

What do I look for in a healthy goat?

Before you buy your goats, it is important to ensure that they are healthy. Goats are inquisitive animals and a healthy goat will usually come up to meet you whereas a sick goat may hang back and be disinterested.

You may also find the following checklist helpful:

- Ears should be erect (except in the Anglo-Nubian whose ears naturally droop)
- Eyes should be clear and free of discharge, and the conjunctiva (the membranes around the edges of the eye) should be a healthy pink colour
- The coat should be clean and glossy, and you should look out for areas of hair loss or scab formation as this may indicate a parasite problem
- Check the rear end for any evidence of diarrhoea.

Goats are ruminants and have four stomachs, the largest being the rumen. They will feed for much of the day and spend periods of rest regurgitating food to chew it further and swallowing again — as part of a process called rumination.

In the wild, goats are browsing animals and will eat a varied diet of grass, weeds, shrubs, branches and hedgerow. If fenced in a grass paddock, you can bring branches and (non-poisonous) hedge trimmings to your goats to allow them to continue to display their natural behaviour. This type of diet must be balanced, particularly in the winter months, with good quality hay, straw and either a commercial pellet feed or ‘coarse mix’ — both of which should contain vitamins and minerals.

In addition to long fibrous food, such as hay, you can also feed your goats cereals such as wheat, barley or oats, but such a diet will need to be balanced with a vitamin and mineral supplement and can lead to dietary upset if fed to excess or introduced suddenly.

Veterinary health plan

You should ask your vet to give your new goats a health check and to advise you on setting up a health plan to keep them fit and well.

This should include advice on:

- Vaccinations (particularly for clostridial disease)
- Parasite control (such as worms and lice)
- Foot care
- Disease control (if goats are co-habiting with other species such as sheep or cattle)
- Action plans for specific events such as care during pregnancy, during kidding and care of the newborn. Newcomers to goat keeping should note, however, that breeding is not advised as it requires a high level of skill and expertise and can contribute to the problem of unwanted animals.



Common health problems

Worms

Worms are a common and potentially serious problem in pet goats, particularly those with limited grazing. Signs include severe diarrhoea, rapid weight loss, dehydration and kidney failure; one worm (*Haemonchus contortus*) causes severe anaemia as the parasite sucks blood from the stomach wall.

Most of the worms that cause problems in goats are shared with sheep. Unlike sheep, however, goats do not become immune, and can remain susceptible throughout their lives. You will need to discuss a control strategy with your vet.

Clostridial disease

The bacteria that cause this condition are part of the normal gut flora, and only cause problems if a gut upset triggers overgrowth and resulting toxin production. Signs include profuse diarrhoea often with blood and mucus, and in severe cases goats can be found dead with no previous signs of illness. Control is based on vaccination, with six-monthly booster doses recommended. You should also avoid any sudden diet change that may upset the gut bacteria.



Skin disease

Goats are susceptible to a wide range of skin diseases including lice, mange, ringworm and orf. Treatment and control rely on early recognition, and a quick confirmation of the cause to ensure that suitable treatment can be given. Some of these conditions may be picked up by anyone handling the affected goat (see Zoonoses below).

Foot problems

The feet of all ruminants, including goats, will grow throughout their lives (similar to our toe and finger nails) and may need trimming to prevent overgrowth. Do not attempt this unless you have been taught how to by an expert (for example, your vet or local goat society), as over-trimming can expose the sensitive underlying tissue causing severe pain and distress to your goat. Any lame goat should be examined as a matter of urgency; it may be something simple such as a stone / thorn getting caught between the claws, or may be more serious — if in doubt consult your vet.



Zoonoses

Zoonoses are diseases that can be picked up by humans in close contact with animals such as goats. Goats with skin problems can transmit ringworm, orf or mange. Young kids with diarrhoea may have a parasite called *Cryptosporidium* that can potentially cause diarrhoea in people, particularly young children. Other infections, such as *Escherichia coli* O157, can cause serious illness in humans and may be carried by healthy goats. The golden rule is to ensure that anyone handling goats is aware of the need to wash their hands before eating or drinking.

If you are milking your goat, be aware of the risk of drinking milk that could potentially be harbouring micro-organisms. These bugs are normally destroyed in milk sold in shops by the process of pasteurisation.

Emergencies

If you need to contact your vet urgently, make sure you know the number (save it on your mobile phone) but also display it clearly near where your goats are kept for anyone looking after them on your behalf.

Make sure you can give an accurate description of exactly where the goats are kept—particularly if they are away from where you live. Have the Ordnance Survey grid reference number handy—or ensure that you can give accurate location instructions.



Legislation

All goats, including a single pet goat, are considered to be farm animals under existing legislation.

Therefore you must:

- Register with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) via your local Animal Health Office (see Further information below) and be issued with a holding number
- Identify your goat by use of an ear tag or other means in accordance with the current legislation
- Maintain a register of movements onto and off the premises
- Maintain a record of all veterinary medicinal products supplied and used.

Under current legislation, any goat that dies cannot be buried, but must be removed so you should seek guidance from the local Animal Health Office of Defra.

You should familiarise yourself with the *Code of Recommendations for the Welfare of Livestock: Goats*. This is available to download directly from the welfare section of the Defra website, or from your local Animal Health Office (also available on Defra's website).



Further information

You can find more information on goat keeping from:

- The British Goat Society, tel: 01626 833168 or www.allgoats.com
- The Defra website, www.defra.gov.uk
- The RSPCA's guide *Goats: Introduction to Welfare and Ownership*
- *Goat Health and Welfare: A Veterinary Guide* by David Harwood (2006, The Crowood Press).





Animal Welfare Foundation

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