



Signs of Livestock Sickness

How to decipher signs of sickness in your livestock.

By Cherie Langlois

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More on Warning Signs Wouldn't it be nice if our animals could communicate with us more clearly?

After years of working with exotic and domestic animals in zoos and on my small farm, I can understand some basic "animal-speak."

I know my sheep flock's incessant baaing means they want dinner NOW. I understand my mare is snapping, "Get that away from me!" when she pins her ears and jerks back from the deworming syringe; but I'd prefer to know more, like why does she hate it so much when it's no big deal for our other horse?

Two-way verbal or telepathic communication would be especially helpful when a health problem arises.

Unlike humans, who often have no qualms about making their illness symptoms known to others, non-human animals have a tendency to hide sickness or injury so they don't get attacked, eaten or bullied.

Signs and symptoms can be subtle, particularly early on.

A horse with mild colic, for example, may just seem sleepier than usual or yawn more often, while obvious signs like kicking at the belly and frequent rolling accompany more severe colic.

A goat with caprine arthritis encephalitis might show only slight swelling in the knees at first; increased swelling and wasting occur as the disease progresses.

First Aid Supplies for Livestock

A first-aid kit is a great asset to have around when an emergency occurs,"

says Jeremy Powell, DVM, an extension veterinarian at the University of Arkansas. "These items and equipment should be available to treat an animal, but shouldn't be used to replace appropriate care that can be provided by your veterinarian."

1. 50 4 x 4 gauze sponges; good for cleaning or dressing wounds.
2. Self-adhering bandage material; used to put pressure on an injury to control bleeding or protect it from dirt and debris.
3. Sterile stretch gauze bandaging, non-adhering bandage pads, cloth tape; keep on hand to dress and bind wounds.
4. Triple antibiotic ointment; applied to minor cuts and abrasions to prevent/treat infection.
5. Dilute iodine or Nolvasan solution; these antiseptics protect against bacteria.



6. Eye wash solution; the human type is fine to use on an animal.
7. Hemostats. This instrument can be employed to clamp off bleeding vessels.
8. Blood stop powder; handy for the control of minor bleeding.
9. Flashlight; helps throw some light on hard-to-see injuries and night-time emergencies.
10. Rectal thermometer with string and clip; be sure to know what temperature is normal for the animal species you keep.
11. Stethoscope; useful for listening to heart, lung and gut sounds.
12. Bandage scissors; snips bandages, gauze and hair.
13. Wire cutters; indispensable for rescuing animals tangled in fences.
14. Latex gloves; protects your hands from contact with blood, diarrhea, amniotic fluid and other unpleasant substances.
15. Large blanket; use as a clean surface or to cover an animal in shock.
16. Animal health records; keep a history of any vaccinations, medications, and medical procedures your animals may have received in an easy-to-locate place.
17. Your veterinarian's contact information and an emergency clinic's phone number; have a cell phone handy with your veterinarian's number programmed in to it so you can reach him or her fast, advises Doug Foote, a farm sitter based in Idaho. It would be so much easier if they could just say, "Hey, you know, I think I'm starting to come down with something ...," but instead the burden falls on us to recognize the warning signs of sickness and injury so we can take swift action.

Why is it so critical for livestock owners to stay alert for early signs of illness?

For one, if a contagious disease is detected promptly, you may be able to prevent its spread to the rest of your herd or flock by isolating or culling the affected animal.

Also, a number of dangerous diseases like rabies, salmonella and anthrax--known as zoonoses--can be transmitted from animals to humans.

Of course, preventing disease in the first place should be a priority, but it's important to remain vigilant in light of recent animal health scares like mad cow, foot and mouth disease, and avian influenza. Early detection and reporting of unusual disease outbreaks is critical for our own health and the health of our country's livestock industry.

Whether you keep animals for food, show, breeding or as pets, it's to your advantage to keep diseases from gaining a foothold on your farm. Timely diagnosis and treatment is also best for the afflicted animal.

"Oftentimes, if disease can be dealt with during the early stages, the affected animal will stand a much better chance of recovery," says Jeremy Powell, DVM, an extension veterinarian at the University of Arkansas who teaches about diseases of livestock. "Colic is a disease that requires treatment to be initiated as quickly as possible. Respiratory disease in cattle is another ailment that requires early detection. If left untreated, severe lung damage can occur, which could be irreversible."

As I've learned the hard way, staying alert for signs of sickness and then acting quickly can mean the difference between life and death.

During our first year raising Jacob sheep, I was shocked and saddened one morning to discover an apparently healthy lamb had died.

A necropsy indicated starvation; somehow I'd missed the signs that he wasn't getting enough milk from his mother.



Fast forward three years: one Sunday after showing our sheep at the fair, I went to feed them breakfast as usual.

Idly, I watched them dig in with enthusiasm--all but Lily, an energetic bottle lamb. She hung back, disinterested, and a warning bell tinkled in my head. I could have chalked up Lily's behavior to an off-day and headed inside for more coffee. Instead I lingered, observing her listlessness and half-closed eyes with growing concern.

After running for my husband and a thermometer, I easily caught her and we took her temperature, which was sky high--a symptom of pneumonia. Thanks to an experienced breeder's speedy advice (our vet's office was closed) and a course of penicillin, this story has a happy ending: Lily bounced back to her perky, gluttonous self in no time.

"The sooner a correct diagnosis is reached, the more likely the animal is to survive," explains Ingrid Painter, a long-time Jacob and Navajo-Churro raiser at Puddleduck Farm in Brownsville, Ore., and the author of *Jacob Sheep in America*. "An illness like pneumonia is fatal if undetected. Often there are no signs like a cough or runny nose--the animal just seems listless and non-caring, maybe even separating from the flock."

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Know Your Animals Well

This may sound a bit obvious, but it's important to know how your animals normally look, move and behave before you can spot any abnormalities.

In my case, I realized something was wrong when Lily didn't race over to eat with the others. By that time, I'd come to know my flock's typical feeding behavior pretty well: They ate like pigs.

Warning Signs Checklist Lethargy, weakness or depression

A change in food and/or water consumption

A change in stool color or consistency; blood present

A change in color, frequency or amount of urine; straining to urinate

Abnormal discharge from nose, eyes, mouth or reproductive tract

Solitary behavior in a normally social animal

Irregular breathing, coughing, gagging or retching

Loss of body weight

Swollen joints or lameness

Skin abnormalities: wounds, hair loss, swellings, etc.

Signs of dehydration

Abnormal vitals: heart rate, respiratory rate, temperature, gum color, etc. Knowing what's normal, however, isn't always easy--especially if you've just acquired a species you've never kept before. Ideally, you should do your research ahead of time: Surf the web, Milk experienced raisers for advice, and Head to the library or bookstore to bone up on livestock health.

"Go to 4-H meetings, talk to veterinarians, and read books on the type of livestock you have," adds Doug Foote, who has operated D & J Enterprises Pet and Livestock Sitting with his wife, Janis, in Eagle, Idaho for 12 years. Conducting their business successfully means knowing what's normal and abnormal for animals ranging from potbellied pigs and emu to bison and horses. The Footes keep an extensive library of animal books and always schedule a pre-farm-sitting visit to become acquainted with their critter clients' normal appearance and behavior.

Spotting the Signs

Once you've researched your livestock breed, bought tons of feed, and created a home for your new animals, it's time to



develop your observation skills.

As you get to know your own critters, keep an eye open for breed, male-female and individual differences, along with seasonal changes in behavior.

Not only do my five Jacobs behave differently from other sheep breeds (they're more active than Cotswolds, for instance), they also differ from each other.

Honeybun baas louder than the rest put together; Shamrock is wary; Friendly Maia loves a good head rub; Lily is curious. Marigold, at the bottom of the hierarchy, often grazes away from the flock. This behavior could be interpreted as a sign of sickness in another sheep, but for Marigold it's normal.

I keep their personalities and individual quirks in mind while looking them over each morning and evening for signs of sickness and injury.

Zoo keepers, who generally care for large numbers of animals during the course of a day, will quickly make the rounds of their exhibits first thing in the morning to check on all their charges before opening time.

Farm sitters, too, must learn to make quick, efficient observations during their visits.

"The first thing you should do is a head count--is everyone accounted for?" says Doug. "Janis went to care for some cattle and she couldn't find the calf. We went out to look for it and found it down with scours and dehydrated. We put in a call to the vet and he came within half an hour and treated it with fluids. Had we not looked for this calf right then, it would have died."

Try to study each of your animals from head to hoof on a daily basis. Use binoculars if you have to.

Don't just toss your cows or goats some hay and high-tail it back inside without a backward glance: chow-time is a great opportunity for closer inspection. Watch how your stock react to your presence, how they move, how quickly they approach their food, and how heartily they eat.

"When feeding your animals, you should observe their behavior every day--anything abnormal should soon become apparent," stresses Painter. Within her own flock, she looks for any sheep behaving differently from the rest, staying alert for listlessness, hunched backs, droopy ears and any animal who seems uninterested in their food.

If it's practical and you can do so safely, regularly use your sense of touch to assess the animal's condition (bison raisers might want to skip this). Whenever I confine my sheep on their stanchion for hoof care or vaccinations, I dig beneath their thick wool with my hands to determine their real body condition and search for lumps or wounds. Grooming your horse, dairy cow, goat or rabbit is an excellent way to check for health problems.

"With our mare, we see her and physically touch her twice a day. I look at her coat, eyes and ears," says Doug. "One reason you brush your horse is to look for injuries. Pet them, play with them, spend some time with them--you'll spot something real quick."

Observing our animals for signs of sickness or injury is a daily job. Like all chores, it's easy for this one to become so automatic that you're simply going through the motions while thinking of your work to-do list. Try to stay focused and in the moment when checking your critters. Avoid burn-out by taking breaks and vacations. Ask your farmer friends, livestock sitter and family for their observations (you'll be surprised at how observant children can be).

Warning Signs

Here are some warning signs to watch for:

Physical appearance: Inspect the animal's skin for wounds, hair loss, lumps or swellings. Does the coat or plumage appear shiny and healthy? A worm infestation, for example, can make a horse's coat shaggy and dull. Is there a change in posture? A sick chicken may stand hunched on both feet with its feathers fluffed out. Has the animal lost weight--a sign that can accompany a number of health problems, from worms to cancer--or does its skin show evidence of dehydration? "Elastic skin that snaps back in place when pulled away from the body is a sign of good hydration," says Dr. Powell. "If the skin stays in a 'tented' position, it's an indicator of dehydration."

Movement: Observe your animals as they move. Do you notice any stiffness that might indicate arthritis? Is the animal



limping or bobbing its head? Lameness could signal a variety of ills, depending on the species: foot rot in a sheep or goat, bumblefoot in a duck, a sole abscess in a horse. If your normally active alpaca is reluctant to budge from his resting spot at all, his behavior should arouse your suspicions. Watch your critters for any out-of-the ordinary head-shaking, pawing, yawning, scratching, rolling or teeth grinding as well.

Attitude and behavior: Your Alpine milk goat, due to kid within the month, always meets you at the gate eager for breakfast, eyes bright and ears perked. This morning, however, she huddles listlessly at the back of her stall and barely glances at the grain you've brought. Her water bucket is untouched. Could it be ketosis, that deadly pregnancy illness you've read about? Whatever the cause, her symptoms warrant action, preferably a call to the vet. Lethargy, weakness, depression, lack of appetite and decreased water consumption are all signs that should set off those inner warning bells. Likewise, be suspicious if one of your banties stops preening its feathers or your once immaculate rabbit quits grooming herself.

Listen up: Are you hearing less (or more) mooing, baaing, crowing, etc. than usual? Keep an eye on your animals' interactions with others. Is your normally social llama or goose suddenly spending time alone? "Most of our domestic livestock are from 'herd' species; therefore, if they aren't with the group, something could be wrong," says Dr. Powell.

Bodily functions and vitals: While not the most pleasant way to spend your time, it's important to keep tabs on your animals' bodily functions. Pay attention to any changes in the color or consistency of their stools when you clean up. Is diarrhea or blood present? Have you noticed any change in urine color, amount or frequency? Has your gelding or ram been straining to urinate? Also, watch for unusual discharge from the eyes, nose, mouth or reproductive tract, recommends Dr. Powell. In a sick bird, feathers may be missing, dirty or pasted around the eyes, nostrils or vent area.

If an animal seems ill and you have the means to do so safely, monitor its vital signs: heart rate, respiratory rate, body temperature, gum color and capillary refill time (how many seconds it takes the pink color to return after you've pressed a finger to the gums). "Vital signs will vary among species, but get familiar with the [normal] vital signs for the particular species that you own," says Dr. Powell.

Again, do some research to find out what's normal for the species and breeds you keep. For example, normal rectal temperature for a llama or horse ranges from 99 to 101.5 degrees F, while a large domestic pig's runs from 101.5 to 103.5 degrees F. A temperature lower than normal could indicate shock or hypothermia, while a higher temperature may only mean the animal has just exercised or it might point to something serious--heat exhaustion, an infection or some other malady.

"Be prepared to call the veterinarian if some of the signs listed are noted," says Dr. Powell. "Always keep a record and be able to explain these abnormal clinical signs to your veterinarian. When did they begin occurring? Are they getting worse? Are they continuous or intermittent? Being able to answer these types of questions will allow your veterinarian to make a faster diagnosis and prescribe the proper treatment."

About the Author: Cherie Langlois is a freelance writer and hobby farmer who raises Jacob sheep and chickens.

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