

Bulletin #1049, When to Call the Veterinarian — Tips for Producers of Small Ruminants in Maine

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As a sheep or goat producer, you will likely face livestock health challenges. Some of these situations may be easily handled on your own or with the help of an experienced producer. In

other cases, you really need the expertise of a veterinarian. Planning ahead by knowing when you would benefit from veterinary help, and budgeting for veterinary care is part of good livestock management. How can you decide when a veterinarian is needed?



If you raise livestock, it is important to have a working relationship with a veterinarian.

This is known as “Veterinary-Client-Patient-Relationship” or VCPR. This means that your veterinarian ought to be familiar with you, your animals, and your set-up. This familiarity likely requires a visit to your farm. Maine law (Sec. 20. 32 MRSA §4877) states that a VCPR exists when a veterinarian has been engaged by the client, has assumed responsibility for medical judgments regarding the patient, knows enough about the particular case to make a diagnosis (this would be due to either a current examination of the patient, or visits to the patient while under this practice’s care), is available for emergencies and continued care, and maintains patient records. Having the veterinarian out to your farm regularly will help establish this VCPR relationship, so they can help you with problems during the year. Ask your veterinarian what he/she considers the appropriate annual interaction for establishing a VCPR with your farm.

Situations when a veterinarian's advice and assistance is needed:

1. Emergencies: You will likely need a veterinarian in emergency situations or when you find you are “over your head” with a health livestock problem. These situations might include:

- **When a predator has attacked your sheep or goats:** See the Maine CDC's flowchart: [Evaluation of Animal Bites and Other Rabies Exposures for Appropriate Animal Control Measures \(PDF\)](#). This chart will help you assess whether you need to consider rabies as a risk to your animals or to yourself and coworkers. Calling your veterinarian prior to handling predator-injured livestock will help you assess the risk to your animals and to you. If the wounds are deep or serious, veterinary care may be prudent.
- **When sudden or multiple deaths have occurred:** If healthy animals suddenly die, or if there is a pattern of losses, then your veterinarian can perform a necropsy, or test other samples to prevent further losses.

2. When production or feed intake drops substantially: Your veterinarian may be able to advise you on specific parasite infestations, nutritional deficiencies or excesses, or other management issues based on testing fecal, feed or blood samples.

3. In addressing a reportable disease: Maine has a list of sheep and goat diseases that your veterinarian is obligated by law to report to State authorities. For a list of reportable diseases of livestock in the state of Maine, see [Disease Information: Reportable Diseases](#).

Some diseases are serious and finding them will result in action by the State Veterinarian. Some are less serious and the State simply wants to keep track of them. It's best to team up with your farm's veterinarian to prevent these diseases and to follow up if they occur.

4. Extra-label use/prescription of drugs or medications: Only a very small number of medications are approved for use in small ruminants, which are considered “minor species.” If an appropriate drug is available “over the counter” (OTC) and the label says you can use it in your animals' species for the specific health situation with which you are dealing, you can use the medication on your own as long as you follow the label directions precisely. However, you may need a different drug, or to use the current one in a different way. **This is considered “extra label” drug use, and must involve your veterinarian; the veterinarian must have a current “veterinary-client-patient-relationship (VCPR)” with the farmer.** ([See above.](#))

The Federal Drug Administration (FDA) considers all sheep and goats, whether owned as pets or for commercial production, as food-producing animals, which triggers the need for accurate withholding times for all drugs, and especially those used in an extra-label manner. Many of the most beneficial animal drugs are only available through a veterinarian's prescription. Under a VCPR, your veterinarian can prescribe these drugs, make extra-label decisions, and provide guidance on withholding times for the harvest of meat and milk products.

5. Health certificate: In order to move livestock across state lines and international borders, a health certificate is required. This requirement benefits all livestock producers by keeping unhealthy or diseased animals from entering the state or being transported to other states or countries. A health certificate, signed by a veterinarian, documents that the animals being shipped or transported are in good health and from a healthy source. Shipping animals requires planning: be sure to find out what certificates are needed, alert your veterinarian about your needs, and give them adequate time to inspect the animals, perform blood tests, and file the certificate forms. Note that health certificates expire after 30 days. Visit [USDA APHIS](#) and the [Maine Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry](#) websites for further information.

6. Pre-purchase exam: Farmers are often excited about new purchases and may overlook subtle signs of problems. One way of avoiding “purchasing problems” is a Pre-Purchase Exam (PPE). In a PPE, a livestock buyer contracts with a veterinarian to complete testing for specific diseases that are not currently on the buyer's farm. The PPE will test for diseases that are important, but not mandated in the Health Certificate. These could include Ovine Progressive Pneumonia (OPP), scrapie, Caseous Lymphadenitis (CL), Infectious Foot Rot, Contagious Ecthyma (Soremouth or Orf), *Coxiella burnetii* (Q Fever) and protozoal reproductive diseases. Animals used to produce milk products are often required to be test-negative for Tuberculosis and Brucellosis, and tests for both can also be completed during the PPE. Veterinary PPE's are analogous to home inspections that are required before a bank grants a mortgage and are a worthwhile investment in farm biosecurity.

7. Annual veterinarian visit: Plan on having your veterinarian come to your farm on an annual basis to look over the management and general condition of your animals. View this visit as a learning opportunity for both you and your veterinarian. Prepare for the visit by having available your flock or herd's health and production records, an inventory of any drugs that you have on hand for your livestock, and any questions you may have for your veterinarian. This routine visit will pay dividends in eliminating and reducing disease in your flock or herd ([see above](#)).

In the long term, having a veterinarian as a part of your team will save you money, help your livestock be more productive and enhance your reputation as a producer. In many instances, the causes of disease are not clearly evident. A veterinarian who practices in your

area often has a unique perspective on locally important disease problems that may impact your own animals. Your veterinarian is trained to diagnose disease and should know where to find diagnostic and treatment solutions for your animals. It only takes one disease outbreak prevented, or potential tragedy avoided, to appreciate the cost-benefits of having a veterinarian on your team.

Recommended information to have ready for your veterinarian

Need to call the veterinarian? Have the following information available:

- **Brief description of your flock/herd:** number of animals, vaccination history, breed, how they are housed
 - **Brief description of the problem:** duration of the problem, ages, and number of animals affected
 - body temperature of affected animals
 - feed and water consumption by affected animals
 - production changes
 - **Recent changes on the farm** (such as feed, minerals, new pasture, predator attacks, newly introduced animals, contact with other animals off-farm, drugs administered, etc.)
 - **Summary of biosecurity efforts** (quarantine procedures and disease screening for new additions, vaccination history, exposure of workers to ill animals, closed flock/herd?)
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