

Lower Leg Joint Swelling

As the alpaca numbers grow in the United States, the incidences of particular medical conditions are now seen more frequently. One such finding is the lameness exhibited from lower leg joints. Typically, the alpaca is still growing and is seen walking with a limp or is "stiff-gaited". Upon examination of the extremities, there may be a noticeable swelling of the affected leg joint when compared to the opposite leg joint. What is consistent with these animals is the lack of external evidence of trauma or crepitis (joint noise) when flexing the joint. Alpacas are one of the most stoic animals when it comes to pain, but with this condition, these animals have a noticeable pain response. It is logical to assume that surely a physical mishap in the pasture is responsible, such as getting a leg caught in the fence, stepping in a hole, getting kicked or simply a sprain from cavorting. There is a temptation to adopt a "wait and see" approach or isolate the animal and just monitor the condition day to day; however, too many of these scenarios turn out to be a progressive systemic (blood borne) infection but appear to the naked eye as just a local joint swelling. Sometimes the swelling will "shift" to another joint in addition to the original one. The alpaca may or may not have an elevated temperature, but one thing consistent is that by waiting, the patient invariably loses ground.

The veterinary tip here is that for any treatment to have a chance, time is of the essence! Do not take a swollen painful joint for granted, but always aggressively treat the animal with a broad-spectrum antibiotic when the condition is first noticed. It may well be something minor, but if you guess wrong, these seemingly minor afflictions could ultimately be the demise of the alpaca. Sometimes more than one antibiotic is necessary for optimum results, but your veterinarian will be able to make this decision. As with any really sick animal, isolation with all the supportive care is a must.