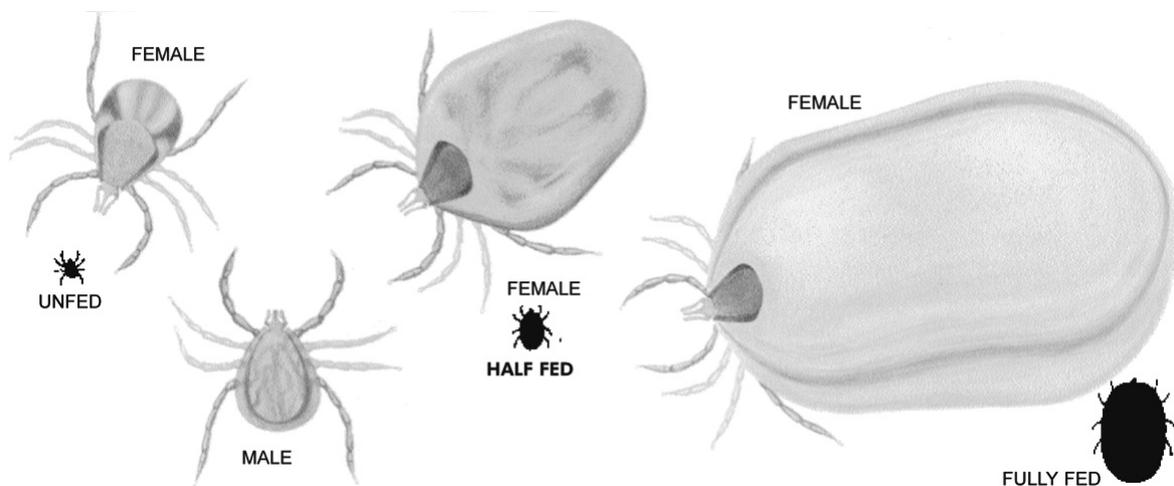




HUSBANDRY CONTROL OF PARALYSIS TICK

The Australian paralysis tick (*Ixodes holocyclus*) is endemic along the east coast of Australia and is responsible for thousands of livestock deaths each year and, regrettably, the alpaca is no exception. The 'tick season' varies from one region to another and may start as early as June/July but in some areas has been known to be active all year round. No matter what area you are in, always check with the local veterinarian as to the initial emergence of ticks – the day the first dog arrives in the surgery with tick paralysis usually heralds the start of the 'tick season'.



Identification of the paralysis tick

The paralysis tick is relatively easy to identify. The legs form a V-shape line from the snout down the sides of the body; the first and last pair of legs are brown and the second and third pair are pale. The body is pear-shaped to oval and yellow-grey to light grey with a dark band on the sides; the face is oval but wider at the rear and brown; the snout is very long.

Effect on the alpaca

If there is the slightest possibility that an animal is suffering the effects of poisoning by a paralysis tick, it is essential to thoroughly check the animal, particularly the eyes, ears, nose, mouth, external genitalia and under each leg.

The paralysis tick secretes a neurotoxin in its saliva that causes a progressive paralysis of the hind limbs and eventually respiratory failure.

The tick may go unnoticed (particularly when the alpaca is in full fleece) until weakness and difficulty in walking develops; urgent veterinary advice is essential at this stage.

How do we minimise the effects of the paralysis tick?

Paralysis ticks are very difficult to control because:

- they are only attached to animals for a short period of about a week,
- each non-parasitic stage may survive for up to nine months on the ground, and
- they can attach to native animals which cannot be treated with a tickicide.

Where possible breeders should be limiting the use of chemicals and this can be achieved by implementing sound farm practices and reviewing pasture and grazing management.



Farm practices

Good farm management and sound animal husbandry

Paddocks should be clean, free of scrub, bladey grass and lantana and, if possible, minimal exposure to native fauna (which are notorious for carrying ticks). In a further attempt to deter the passage of tick carrying native fauna, some breeders have gone to the trouble of erecting chain mesh fencing!

Because of the vulnerability of newborn and young cria, careful selection of clean paddocks must be given high priority. Most breeders will have this group in a 'maternity paddock', certainly for the first few weeks.

Also, paddock rotation, sowing improved native pasture species and keeping pasture short are also considered to be very beneficial.

Separating stock

To minimise the possibility of exposure to ticks from other livestock, alpacas should be grazed in separate paddocks. Isolating new animals as they come on to the property will give breeders time to assess the condition of the animal.

Other strategies

Some other strategies worthwhile considering include:

Regular checking

Whilst not always possible in larger herds, physically checking the cria on a daily basis is a certain way to detect ticks before paralysis becomes apparent. At least observing the herd each day is important. If an animal is not keeping up with the herd or is listless and has difficulty in walking, and especially in the hind legs, be very concerned. There is no room for complacency!

Guinea fowl

Whilst lacking scientific endorsement, running guinea fowl with the alpacas is recommended by many breeders. It appears the fowls eat the developing larvae and nymphs and help reduce the tick population.

Dog tick collars

Several breeders are claiming success with the use of dog tick collars. It is essential not to trim the end of the collar but to leave a 'tail' to allow for the fleece growth on the alpaca's neck and to be able to readjust the collar periodically. The collar must be checked regularly, particularly on young growing animals.

'Cydectin' by injection

This drug is used only during the tick season i.e. approximately 6 months. Caution must be exercised when using Cydectin; whilst acting as a tick control it can select resistant parasites when used too often. This will apply not only for the cattle tick being targeted but also for internal parasites such as Barber's Pole Worm. (The active ingredient in Cydectin is Moxidectin, a broad spectrum parasiticide).

It must also be emphasised that there is still no veterinary product registered for exclusive use for the alpaca. This is also the case with tick collars. So breeders please be aware!

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Australian paralysis tick will always be a part of some regions of our landscape and those alpaca breeders will have to learn to live with them! As with so many management practices any prophylaxis is dictated by the environmental and climatic conditions together with the breeders' experience and herd size. Breeders can try many different techniques which will minimise exposure but there is no sure way to prevent paralysis occurring in alpacas.

What suits one breeder may not suit another – each situation must be assessed on its own merit.

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Disclaimer: The management practices detailed in this overview do not constitute veterinary advice. Any alpaca appearing to have an adverse condition should be assessed by a veterinarian.