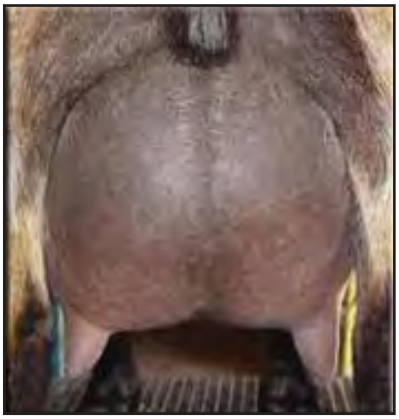
Recommendations For "Drying" Up Your Doe or Ewe

by Dr. Beth Johnson

You have spent the last 10 months milking your dairy goat/sheep or you are weaning a group of young kids or lambs and wondering how to best dry off their dams without developing mastitis. As with most animals, we have fed the producing doe/ewe to meet her energy demands for lactation. The first step is to reduce the nutrient intake of your animals so the milk production is reduced. Management practices used to stop milk production is different depending on the stage and level of milk production of an animal.



Picture of a goats udder that is full of milk but not showing evidence of mastitis.

Dairy Goats/Sheep: Most dairy goats are milked until 2 months prior to kidding. Their level of production has usually decreased to a level that the animal can be dried up relatively easy. But, what about those girls that are still milking a gallon when it is time for them to be dried up? Heavy milk producers are the ones that pose a concern for the prevention of mastitis during and immediately after drying off.

1) Reduce the animals nutrient intake by at least ½ of what she was receiving for production, i.e. animal was being fed 4 lbs of an 18% grain ration and at least 4lbs of alfalfa hay.

2) Reduce the amount and quality of grain/hay being fed. I would reduce to 2 lbs of a 16% ration and grass hay.

3) If you continue to milk the doe/ewe she will continue to produce milk. Therefore, start reducing her milkings to once daily for one week. Then for the following week, milk every other day for 3-4 milkings. Then stop milking completely.

4) Once you have completed Step 3, wait one week and then milk her out. As aseptically as possible, infuse each udder half with one tube of "dry cow" mastitis prevention antibiotics. There are several commercially available mastitis prevention tubes available both over the counter (OTC) and through your veterinarian. If you have had an animal with mastitis, consult with your veterinarian in choosing the appropriate antibiotic to use in the dry period.

Picture of goat with severe gangrenous mastitis, udder feels very cold, severe hardness when udder felt.

Weaning Time

You have raised some beautiful kids/lambs on your doe/ewe and it is 2-4 months after they delivered their offspring. Now it is time to wean the offspring. This is one of the most stressful times for both the young and the old. We usually wean animals in a group instead of individually. This makes it easier for both the offspring, their dams and also the caretakers.

1) If possible, provide just pasture or grass hay to the dams for one week. Just like the dairy animals, it is important to reduce nutrient intake during the weaning period. Although some livestock producers limit the dam's water intake, I do not recommend this practice especially in the warmer climates. The last thing you want is to upset their digestive tract by dehydrating them.

2) Monitor the dam's udder for evidence of mastitis (i.e. hot or cold inflamed udder, hardness &/or discoloration of udder half). Udders may become "strutted" because they are full of milk, but they should still maintain a soft texture to the udder- not hard or hot.

3) If mastitis is detected, treat with systemic antibiotics and treat the affected half with an antibiotic infusion tube. Treat initially with a short acting infusion (lactating) followed by a long term infusion (dry) tube, if an active case of mastitis is present. If a doe/ewe developed mastitis while nursing her offspring then be sure to treat her prophylactically with a "dry" cow mastitis infusion tube at weaning.

Remember, our primary goal is to have a healthy, happy doe/ewe that can contribute to next year's kid/lamb crop. If we don't take care of the udder, then they are usually prematurely culled from the herd/flock because without an udder, they are useless to us for future production!

Dr. Beth Johnson *is a Staff Veterinarian in the Kentucky Department of Agriculture and has 40 years of experience raising and treating small ruminants. Her family farm is in Parksville, KY where she raises Gelbvieh cattle and Boer goats.*