

MANAGING NEGLECT CASES



BASICS

OVERVIEW

- **Neglect** is the failure to provide proper shelter, food, or water for an animal. Neglect may also include failure to provide veterinary care to an animal that is ill or injured.
- **Abuse and cruelty** includes the intentional act, omission, or neglect whereby unnecessary or unjustifiable physical pain or suffering is caused or permitted. Examples include poking with a sharp object, excessively beating, intentionally scaring, or poisoning an animal.
- **Owner** is anyone who cares for, possesses, controls, or otherwise assumes custody and is responsible for an animal's care.
- ***American Veterinary Medical Association Policy on Animal Abuse and Neglect:***
 - The AVMA recognizes that veterinarians may observe cases of animal abuse or neglect as defined by federal or state laws, or local ordinances. The AVMA considers it the responsibility of the veterinarian to report such cases to appropriate authorities, whether or not reporting is mandated by law. Prompt disclosure of abuse is necessary to protect the health and welfare of animals and people. Veterinarians should be aware that accurate, timely record keeping and documentation of these cases are essential. The AVMA considers it the responsibility of the veterinarian to educate clients regarding humane care and treatment of animals.

PHYSICAL EXAMINATION FINDINGS

- ***Evaluating animal condition***
 - History of the neglected animals in the preceding weeks or months should be initiated through discussion with the owner. However, the owner may provide misleading or false information. Contacting their veterinarian and/or feed supplier may assist an objective assessment. Others involved in the investigation may provide information, especially the details on the timeline of events.
 - Identification of specific animals should include a written record and/or photographs using the following as a guide:
 - General characteristics, including gender, breed, age, coat color, markings, ear tags, ear markings, tattooing, microchips, neck chains, and hot iron or freeze brands.
 - Specific identifying marks such as scars, blindness, or other unique conformation characteristics.
 - Photographs of side, rear and front stances are helpful in identifying animals, especially with seasonal changes in coat color and fluctuations in body condition.
 - Body condition or weight should be assessed on the initial visit and at weekly intervals during rehabilitation.

- Scales provide the most accurate body weight measurement. Portable scales are available for large animals. Truck scales may be used for animals being transported.
- Body condition scoring protocols are commonly utilized under field conditions to evaluate body condition. The scoring method is based on visual appraisal and/or palpable fat in different locations on the body. *See chapters on body condition scoring for descriptions of individual scores for ruminant species and camelids.*
- Injuries should be documented along with their location and severity.
- Health of animals should be evaluated by the veterinarian with consideration to any necessary diagnostic tests. Physical examination of each animal should be performed. The symptoms of the starvation over time include:
 - Behavioral changes occur first with a depressed reactivity to external stimuli and human contact, sunken eyes, lethargic, unsteady and listless.
 - Reduced resistance to bacterial and parasitic infection due to compromised immune system.
 - Body weight loss in first 24 hours is due to stomach and intestinal contents in beef cattle. This is followed by a decrease in muscle glycogen after 3 to 4 days. Mobilization of fat with the stabilization in the production of ketones and plasma free fatty acids requires 5 or 6 days in fasted sheep.
 - Pregnant cows which are fasted are very susceptible to ketosis due to the metabolic demand of the fetus exacerbating the nutritional demands.
- Evaluate any existing parasitic infections and control program.
- Examine dental condition.
- Evaluate hoof condition. Photograph overgrown hooves with a ruler to provide a reference for the length of hoof.
- Perform or submit dead animals for necropsy with consideration to the following:
 - Atrophy of fat depots occurs first followed by muscle wasting with prolonged starvation.
 - Parasites should be identified.
 - Tissues for histology should be submitted for liver and kidney, and when appropriate, thymus, pancreas, intestinal wall, or lymph nodes.
 - Other medical conditions, such as toxemia or bacterial infection, can be identified with necropsy.
- Document presence and condition of any other animals on premises.
- Recommendations for immediate care or treatment should be discussed and presented in written form to the owner and any authorities. Less urgent recommendations can be written as an educational document to the owner or report to enforcement authorities.

Causes of Emaciation - Causes can be multi-factorial and include:

- Lack of quantity and quality of feed, especially the nutrient content and balance of energy and protein. Deficiencies of certain minerals and vitamins over the long-term can contribute to emaciation, but also the excessive use of some supplements.

- Seasonal declines in the primary feed source such as pasture.
- Malabsorption of nutrients associated with diarrhea or poor dental function.
- Parasites can be either a primary or secondary contributor to emaciation.
- Conditions such as lactation, pregnancy, young or old age since they have the highest nutrient requirements, smallest fat deposits, and possibly the lowest position in the herd hierarchy which may limit feed access.
- Pathological conditions such as cancer, diabetes, infections, or diseases of the liver, kidney, pancreas, or heart can elicit symptoms associated with emaciation.

CAUSES AND RISK FACTORS

- Ignorance or lack of skills account for more than 50% of neglect cases. These neglect cases usually can be resolved with proper education.
- Economic hardship can precipitate neglect especially in animals kept as companions.
- Apathy or laziness of the care provider can impair proper care.
- Illness, injury, or substance abuse over a long term compromises quality of care.
- Domestic violence strategies may use the neglect of an animal to “punish” a person such as a child or spouse.



DIAGNOSIS

Assessment by the Veterinarian

- **Safety-** Safety is a concern for the veterinarian. Proceed with caution since the cause of neglect is unknown and the suspected perpetrator may be psychologically unstable. Do not trespass to help an animal, as this act may result in criminal charges, jeopardize your credibility, and damage any existing legal proceedings against the owner.
- **Reporting-** Start and maintain a log book recording all communication and visits. Include the date and time with each entry. Record both positive and negative observations. Be objective in assessments.
 - Record the property address and names of the contact people, owners, and witnesses.
 - Write summaries of all phone calls, meetings, and in-person discussions.
 - Record, in detail, all oral and written recommendations and instructions.
 - Samples submitted to commercial laboratories should be recorded and the proper chain of custody procedures should be followed.
- **Environment**
 - Record, and if possible, photograph the conditions of the facility in detail at each visit including the facility’s size and design such as barns, flooring, bedding, feeders and water containers, corral or stall design and its maintenance, water supply, and outside pen conditions (i.e., appropriate fencing, presence of mud, and hazardous objects or materials).
 - Note compatibility of animals within an enclosure and if any overcrowded conditions exist.
 - Document the type, amount and condition of feed and additives accessible to the animals, pasture forage type and condition, and any feed which is stored on premises. Note consumption or refusal of any offered feed.

Identify any poisonous weeds in pasture. Consider sampling pasture or feed for nutrient content by chemical analysis at an approved laboratory.

- Document the water source, the cleanliness, and consider submitting water for analysis of any toxins or pathogens.
- Document sanitation of the facility including manure management, water cleanliness, presence of pests, or other conditions that impact animal health.

ROLE OF VETERINARIAN

- Medical evaluation including diagnosis, prognosis, supportive treatment and/or rehabilitation is the expertise of the veterinarian.
- Education can resolve most neglect cases and the veterinarian is qualified to participate as the lead educator in the resolution of neglect cases.
- Reporting neglect cases to authorities should be reserved for those offenders who consciously ignore educational efforts or failed to initiate remedial steps. Reporting animal abuse or neglect may be mandatory under some governmental authorities. If reporting is not compulsory, “good faith” reporting is warranted for the veterinary professional.
 - There is a strong connection between animal cruelty and human violence including child or spousal abuse. Reporting human abuse is mandatory under some governmental authorities. If not, veterinarians aware of suspicious circumstances should consider reporting to the proper agency.
- A veterinarian is considered an expert witness for testifying in the legal prosecution of animal abuse or neglect.

ROLE OF OTHER AGENCIES

- Investigations are usually initiated by humane or animal protection organizations.
- Law enforcement, such as animal control officers, sheriffs’ departments, local and state police, or governmental veterinarians, may investigate as well as enforce existing codes, regulations and laws.
- Law enforcement is also concerned about public health and safety. Social services may assist with an animal neglect case if there is suspected human violence or other human safety or health needs.

Rehabilitating Recommendations

- Relocation of animals to another site should be carefully evaluated since this will cause additional stress to the animals from transportation, adaptation to novel environments, and social adjustments.
- Re-feeding protocols will depend on many factors such as species, age, body condition, severity of neglect, cause of emaciation, and stage of production.
- Treatment of starved ruminants is primarily symptomatic of ketosis. Fasted cows or sheep in late pregnancy may have hypocalcemia, hypophosphatemia, and elevation in blood ketones, SGOT, and plasma free fatty acids concentrations.
- Re-feeding protocols have not been established, but high quality palatable feed with available carbohydrates, roughage, minerals and vitamins is recommended (NRC, 2001). In short-term fasted ruminants, a diet close to the original pre-fast diet will minimize adaptation by the microbial flora. In goats fasted for 5 days, the ruminal microbial population was able to respond within a few days.
- The severely starved ruminant must be able to live up to two weeks as the digestive tract transitions from a negative to positive energy balance. Consumption of accessible feed may be low in severely starved animals. Loss of 25 to 30% of body weight has a

poor prognosis and death is likely due to lack of sufficient glucose production to meet the needs of the brain.

ABBREVIATION

- FARAD= Food Animal Residue Avoidance Databank

SEE ALSO

- Animal Welfare (www.fiveminutevet.com/ruminant)
- Anesthesia Inhalation
- Anesthesia Injectable
- Anesthesia: Local and Regional
- Disaster and Emergency Preparedness and Response (www.fiveminutevet.com/ruminant)
- Food Animal Residue Avoidance Databank (FARAD)

Suggested Reading

American Veterinary Medical Association Policy Statement on Animal Abuse and Neglect. Accessed May 2016 <https://www.avma.org/KB/Policies/Pages/Animal-Abuse-and-Animal-Neglect.aspx>

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