



What Are Alpacas?

Alpacas are livestock raised primarily for their soft, luxurious fleece. Members of the camelid family, alpacas come in two breed types: Huacaya (pronounced *wuh-KAI-ya*) and Suri (*SUR-ee*). Huacayas, the more common type, have fluffy, crimped fleece that gives them a teddy bear-like appearance. Suris grow silky, lustrous fleece that drapes gracefully in beautiful pencil-like locks.

Alpacas stand about 36 inches high at the withers (where the neck and back come together) and generally weigh between 125 and 200 pounds. They mainly eat pasture grass or hay, although they are also browsers and will eat shrubs or leaves from trees if given the opportunity. The general rule of thumb is to feed 1.5% of body weight per day in pasture or grass hay — approximately 2 to 3 pounds daily. Alfalfa should be fed sparingly due to its high protein content.

Alpacas are modified ruminants with a single stomach divided into three compartments. They produce rumen and chew cud, allowing them to process modest amounts of food very efficiently. Many alpacas—especially pregnant and lactating females—benefit from nutritional and mineral supplements depending on local conditions. Several manufactured alpaca and llama feeds and mineral mixes are readily available. Feeding grain to alpacas should be done judiciously, as too much grain can be detrimental and may even cause death. Alpacas also require access to plenty of fresh water to drink, and care must be taken to ensure that water buckets do not run dry.

Alpacas have adapted successfully to the extremes of both very hot and very cold climates. In hot, humid environments, extra precautions should be taken to avoid heat stress. These include shearing fleeces before the summer heat, providing fans and good ventilation, and hosing off their bellies on very hot days.

Alpacas are induced ovulators, which means that if males and females are kept together, the males may breed the females. For this reason, it is best to keep males separated from females.

Halter fit is extremely important, as alpacas must be able to breathe through their noses. They have short nose bones, and the halter noseband must be placed high on the bone—not below it on the soft tissue, where it might cut off nasal breathing.

Alpacas use spitting as a means of communication. They may spit at one another during squabbles or feeding and may spit at people if upset.

Alpacas are relatively easy livestock to maintain. They need basic shelter and protection from heat and foul weather, just like other livestock. If predators are present in the area, a minimum of five-foot-high, non-climb fencing is strongly recommended. They establish easy-to-manage communal dung piles and require certain vaccinations and anti-parasitic medications.

Their fleece is sheared once a year for processing—usually in the spring—to help keep them cool in the summer. Alpacas do not have hooves; instead, they have two toes with hard toenails on top and a soft pad on the bottom of their feet. This minimizes their impact on pastures and makes them an environmentally friendly animal. Their toenails need to be trimmed as needed to ensure proper foot alignment and comfort.

For identification, owners may use ear tags or microchips placed at the base of an ear, the base of the neck, or elsewhere. If an ear tag or microchip is registered with the Alpaca Owners Association (AOA), it may be possible to determine the owner of a displaced alpaca by calling 402-437-8484.

The most important end product of alpacas is their fleece (also called fiber). Like sheep, they are classified as livestock by both the United States and Canadian federal governments. Each shearing produces roughly five to ten pounds of fleece per animal per year. This fleece—often compared to cashmere—can be turned into a wide variety of products, from yarn and apparel to tapestries and blankets. Alpaca fleece is recognized globally for its fineness, softness, light weight, durability, excellent thermal qualities, and luster.

Alpaca Owners Association, Inc. (AOA) is the world's largest alpaca association, with over 290,000 alpacas in its registry database. AOA's primary purpose is to promote awareness of alpacas and alpaca products while maintaining an official DNA-validated genealogical registry system. The association administers an alpaca show system, provides education to members and the public about sustainable alpaca businesses, markets alpacas and alpaca products, and promotes scientific research to benefit the alpaca industry.

For more information about AOA and alpacas, please visit www.alpacainfo.com.