

Do they spit?



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The title for this article is inspired by the three questions you are going to be asked on taking your alpacas to any public event. The other two are ‘What is the difference between a llama and an alpaca?’ and ‘Can you eat them?’. I’m going to leave the second two to you to work out your answers, and I would dearly love a funny and witty one line response to give to the first. Please email me with your suggestions. I will give a free halter to the best one and publish it in my next article.

I thought I would go into spitting in a bit more depth and talk about why camelids spit, how we inadvertently provoke this behaviour and what we can do about it should our beloved animals already have or look like they are developing, this unpleasant habit.

Firstly the answer to the question in the title is yes they can. All camelids can, but fortunately most choose not to do so at humans. To be perfectly precise, however, camelids don’t actually spit as what is flying around is not saliva but stomach contents....

There are degrees of spitting – the first (and most minor) which normally happens at feeding time is a warning, shot gun type spit involves feed from the mouth traveling at velocity propelled by a burp. If this lands on you because you are caught in the crossfire, it is slightly painful, but not particularly unpleasant, although it may necessitate a quick hair comb, especially if you feed your alpacas before you go into work.... The alpacas are being protective towards their feed, not being aggressive towards you. The best way to avoid a ‘spitfest’ is to make sure there are plenty of troughs placed apart from each other so that everyone gets a turn to eat in peace. I never try and handle my animals whilst they are eating, I wouldn’t like it if someone tried to interrupt me whilst I was having my dinner and I respect their right to finish their food first.

The second type of spit which is more likely to include green stomach contents (and which is unpleasant, should this land on you) can be generated by:

- dominance disputes,
- pregnancy
- bad handling or previous bad experiences with humans.

Both males and females have hierarchies that apply to precedence in feeding or the right to use desirable features of your property such as the paddling pool, the dustbath or field shelter.



Competition over the paddling pool....

Entire (ungelded) males will also become aggressive to one another, usually, but not always in the presence of open females and will spit, scream and bite each other. Females can have quite vocal disputes, but often will resolve the issues around hierarchy with a significant look and a warning spit. With regard to their facial expressions, 'ears back' is not necessarily a sign of aggression, as it is in horses, but more one of concern.

Spot the difference between Angelica who is not afraid of humans and Jude who is.....



Angelica is curious and unafraid...



Jude is keeping her distance and is ready to react...

Females have what I call a 'kick button' around the hindquarters. We can press this button by attempting to stroke them anywhere around the hip area, and this may also generate a warning spit. This response relates to their readiness to mate and if they are pregnant, touching anywhere near their rear end can generate 'a full greenie'. In fact, this is how we know a female is pregnant, by conducting spit offs with the male. Once again, it is always good to avoid being caught by the cross fire in these encounters!

There isn't very much we can do about the preceding types of spitting in our herds (apart from gelding all non-stud males - something I thoroughly recommend), it is just a fact of camelid life. It doesn't happen very often and usually we aren't affected. However, if an alpaca develops a fear of humans, we become the object of the spit and handling our alpaca becomes unpleasant for all concerned! The stomach contents are foul smelling and very acidic. You can tell an alpaca that has been spitting because their mouth will be hanging open and dripping green. Their mouth tastes horrible and they don't want to close it or to eat or drink with it.....

You may be unlucky and have acquired an alpaca that has had bad experiences before they came to you or you have unwittingly created a problem through not knowing good handling techniques. It used to be the case that many alpacas were imported from South America and they were often quite challenging in their behaviour. These days most alpacas are 'home bred' and don't present these problems nearly so frequently. Two exceptions come to mind, however; one was a male who had been gelded using a painkiller but not a sedative, a practice I would never endorse. The second was an overhandled, bottlefed male alpaca. For more information on how to avoid problem males have a look at previous articles available on my website.

Here are a few tips on 'dialling down' an alpaca's stress levels so that they don't feel the need to spit at you. The number one tip is to remember that alpacas are prey animals, our job as their caregiver is to not behave like predators. This means if we

chase them, corner them or grab them we are going to make them scared and they may spit.



Handling pens

Instead use herding routes and small (8ft by 8ft) pens for handling and learn better techniques (better than grab and grip!) for asking your alpaca to be still. Even after previous bad handling alpacas will forgive humans and you can have a much better relationship with them. You can find out much more from my website: www.carthveanalpacas.com. Happy Handling!