

NEW YORK STATE 4-H DAIRY GOAT PROJECT FACT SHEET #19

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BEHAVIOR OF GOATS: PART II – MATING AND MATERNAL BEHAVIOR

An understanding of your goat's mating and maternal behavior is necessary to ensure a good breeding program. Your doe's behavior will change during the breeding season and you should be able to recognize these changes.

Mating Behavior

During the normal mating season (fall), bucks and does begin to show signs that they are ready to breed. At about 21-day intervals, a doe will come into estrus or "heat". At this time she will accept the buck. There are a few signs that will tell you when your doe is ready to be bred. It is important to be able to recognize these signs so that you can breed your doe at the correct time. In most cases, the doe's activity level will increase. She may pace along the fence line and bleat frequently. Her appetite and milk yield may also decrease.

During the breeding season, the buck will try to attract does to himself by urinating on his front legs and chest. The does in heat are attracted to the odor of the buck's urine. The buck also has scent glands located in front of his horns. These give off another attractive odor to the females in estrus (not very attractive for humans!).

A good way to find out which does in your herd are in heat is to use a "buck rag". This is made by rubbing a rag over the scent glands and urine-soaked beard of the buck. This rag is then placed in a jar. Let your does smell the rag at least twice daily. Does in heat will tend to follow the rag and flag (wag their tails rapidly). On closer inspection, their vulvas may appear swollen and have a discharge. The jar should be kept tightly closed and out of the sun when not in use.

Once a buck has found a doe in estrus, he will begin to court her before the actual mating takes place. He begins by sniffing the doe's vulva and urine. He then raises his head, extends his neck and raises his upper lip while moving his head from side to side. This is called the "Flehmen reaction". The buck may then nudge the doe with his shoulder while pawing with a foreleg. During the courting the doe will remain still and may bleat.

After courting, the buck will mount the doe for copulation or mating. The doe acknowledges this by turning her head back to look at the buck.

Maternal Behavior

Once your pregnant doe is close to kidding, she will try to separate herself from the rest of the herd. She will show restlessness and may bleat frequently. When the doe begins to kid she will first try to hollow out a nest on the ground to lay in. She will then proceed to deliver her kid or kids. (You may have to help at this point. See Dairy Goat Fact Sheet#20, Delivering Kids).

After kidding (and after she has passed the fetal membranes), the doe will begin to lick and smell the placenta and then lick and smell her kid. This is called “bonding” and will help her identify her own kids. If another kid has been orphaned, you can sometimes get a foster mother to accept it by first rubbing her own kid’s placenta over the alien kid.

After the newborn kid is strong enough to stand, it will immediately search for the doe’s udder in hopes of finding food. When suckling, the kid will wag its tail quickly and the doe will sniff under the kid’s tail. This also aids in the bonding process.

When the doe returns to the herd, she becomes very protective of her kid and will butt away any intruding kids that try to nurse. Under natural conditions, the doe will automatically wean her kid at 6 months to a year of age. She accomplishes this by grazing in areas where she can consume more roughage and this change in diet will decrease milk production. She also actively rejects suckling attempts by her kid.

In many dairy goat herds, the kids are weaned at birth for a variety of management reasons and fed on pasteurized colostrum and milk. One of the most important of these is to avoid the spread of CAE (Caprine Arthritis Encephalitis) from a carrier doe to her offspring through her infected milk and colostrum. The doe may object to this and become very restless. To ease the doe’s distress, you may pen the kid near the doe so she can see it and smell it, but not allow it to nurse. The kid will also show displeasure at being separated. If the doe and kid are separated, you will need to milk the doe out by hand. If you regularly milk your doe, she will come to think of you as her kid and will treat you as such. This means you may have difficulty getting her to go where you want her to. She may be too busy trying to herd you around!

Suggested Activities

- 1) Make a buck jar. Be sure to protect any nice clothes you are wearing with a smock or overalls to keep the buck smell from contaminating them. Plan on taking a shower or bath and putting on clean clothes when you are done handling the buck.
- 2)
- 3) Observe a kidding, noting the behavior of the doe and kid. Take the kid away after bonding has occurred and watch the reaction of the doe. Replace her kid with another kid and note the results.
- 4) Using the buck jar (or just observation), try and pick out the does that are in heat in a herd.*
- 5) Observe does and bucks during the mating season and again out of season. Note the difference.
- 6) Observe a mating demonstration. Note the courting behavior of the buck.

* Activity is suitable for Cloverbuds.