

# Sand Impaction: Symptoms and Prevention

by Susan Buser

**S**andy soil can be wonderful—it drains well, grows nice pastures and doesn't turn your alpacas or llamas that lovely shade of peachy-orange that is all too familiar to many of us with clay pastures. But...if you have sandy soil you need to be aware of a potentially serious problem: sand impaction. Sand impaction in the alpaca's stomach can cause digestive problems, serious illness and even death if not properly treated.

In the early stages, this condition is often referred to as sand colic. It becomes an impaction when sand collects and begins to seriously block digestion.

Why would an alpaca or lama ingest sand? They may accidentally pick up sand as they graze, especially when they are grazing on short and sparse forage. Some may also nibble on sand out of sheer boredom if they are in a very small pasture or on dry lot and there are some animals who are temperamentally inclined to nibble on everything around them. Observe your animals and be familiar with their individual personality quirks and you may be able to predict which ones will be most susceptible to this problem.

What are the symptoms of sand colic or impaction? Some of the earlier indicators include weight loss, anemia (indicated by light-colored gums), a soft unformed stool, and parasite infestation. The sand blockage impedes proper digestion and so compromises the animal nutritionally, leading to the weight loss and anemia. The compromised animal is not able to fight off parasites, and often develops a parasite load in addition to his other problems.

As the problem becomes worse, the animal becomes bloated in the belly, very thin along the ridgeline and may stop producing any fecal matter at all. He may be eating ravenously because he

feels like he is starving due to limited nutritional uptake.

We had an unfortunate personal experience with this, early in our alpaca-raising adventure. At that time, we were on a farm that had very sandy pastures. Since we were new in the business, we had never heard of sand colic or sand impaction.

We had a beautiful young male who appeared down and began to lose weight. We also noticed also that he was producing a soft stool and his gums were lighter than they should be.

Upon examination by a vet, we discovered that his pac cell volume was low and that he had a parasite load, despite regular de-wormings. He was treated for the low pac cell volume and the parasites by the local vet at an area hospital, but did not improve. We were given medication to administer several times a day, which we did, faithfully.

His belly began to appear distended, and his stool became softer (about the consistency of soft-serve ice cream). He would eat ravenously, but less and less fecal matter was being produced. The vet instructed us to treat him for a stomach ulcer, which we did, not knowing anything different.

Eventually he stopped producing any fecal matter at all, became weak, and unfortunately we lost him.

We didn't know why we had lost him until the necropsy revealed a fist-sized impaction of sand in his stomach. Unfortunately the primary problem had never been diagnosed so that it could be treated.

Loss of an animal is always heartbreaking to any of us owners. The good news is that with a little knowledge plus the use of an easy and inexpensive preventative treatment, you should be able to protect your alpacas and llamas from this tragedy.

If you have sandy or loose soil, especially if you have areas not covered in grass, you need to top dress the animals' feed with a product containing psyllium husks every 6 weeks to 6 months, depending on the severity of your sand problem. You can purchase a product called "Sand Clear" at your local feed and seed store or a non-flavored Metamucil type product at your local Walmart or drugstore.

Pour out one cup of feed into the feed bucket, spritz it lightly with water from a

spray bottle, then sprinkle the psyllium product over it until the feed looks like a heavily sugared cereal. Repeat this procedure on all the animals' feed for the day. Serve this to everyone for 5 days in a row to flush their system of any sand they may have ingested. If you have specific problem animals or a few animals on very sandy pastures (when others are not), you may choose to treat different groups of animals more or less aggressively according to your assessment of their risk for this problem.

Another help in prevention is to graze your animals on long forage (2"-4"); if long forage is not available, keep plenty of hay available to them. The long stems are important for their digestive health and will assist in keeping their system clear of sand. Ready access to water is also important for keeping their system working properly.

If you suspect your alpaca or llama may have sand colic, consult a knowledgeable vet as soon as possible. Early cases can be treated by multiple daily doses of mineral oil by oral syringe; more serious cases of actual impaction will require immediate supportive therapy (IV fluids) and quite possibly surgery to remove the blockage. Take the alpaca to an area veterinary hospital as soon as possible if you suspect an impaction.

Remember, always observe your animals carefully, be aware of your soil content and pasture condition, and take the time to provide this inexpensive preventative measure for your alpacas. This is one problem that is easy to prevent.

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## **About the Author**

*Susan Buser is an alpaca farm owner who is strongly committed to the education and success of new breeders in the industry. Susan was the founding president of the AOBA affiliate the Alpaca Small Farm Network where she dedicated 3 years toward the establishment of educational programs and networks of support for the farmers in the region. She and her husband Zac are personally committed to helping farms in their area in any way they can from education to hands-on help in an emergency. Susan and Zac enjoy raising their own huacaya herd plus a number of boarders on their farm, Abbondanza Alpacas, in Greenville, SC. You may contact Susan at [susanbuser@earthlink.net](mailto:susanbuser@earthlink.net) [www.beautifulalpacas.com](http://www.beautifulalpacas.com)*