

The Importance of Correct Head Collar Fit in Alpacas

Head collar fit in alpacas can have major implications for the feeling of health and well-being of your alpacas for two reasons:

- 1) Alpacas are semi-obligate nasal breathers. This means they can only survive by breathing through their mouths for a short period of time (and even this has been shown to be like trying to drink a thick milkshake through a small straw).
- 2) When looking at their skull, the bone which forms the nose only extends a short way in front of the eye, beyond which it is cartilage.



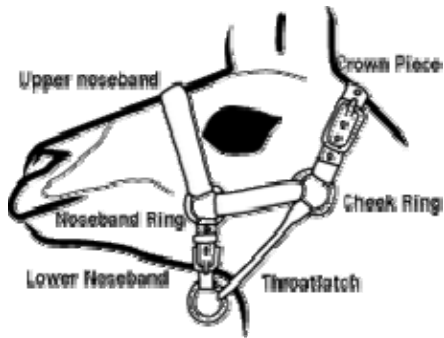
For this reason, alpacas with an incorrectly fitting head collar can feel that they are either being or about to be suffocated. This can cause behaviour that appears almost “brainless” in an otherwise very calm alpaca. Haltering issues such as these can easily be solved by checking and correcting (if necessary) the fit of your halter.

One reason for problems with halter fit is the variety of head shapes and sizes in alpacas. Of particular importance is the variation in length of the part of the nose that is bone. Some alpacas have very short heads and the heads of crias that have a lot of growing to do are sometimes not big enough to safely fit a halter on. Even with adults, there is some variation in the length of the bone of the nose in front of the eye. In a weanling, for example, the nose bone may be only about an inch or so in length, and even less for young crias. **It is very important to check, by gently feeling the top of your alpaca’s nose – forward of the eye – if there is any doubt.**

Another cause of problems, is the adjustability of your halter, and whether it can be safely and comfortably fitted to your alpaca – and whether it will stay adjusted in this way, no matter what.

A correctly fitting halter sits in such a way that the nose band remains permanently on the bony part of the nose. It should be fitted so that it crosses the nose just in front of the eye – see correct halter fit below. **The halter may appear that it is fitting too close to the eye, but this really is the best position.** Tightening up the nose band so that there is room to fit

two fingers vertically under the jaw bone (in an adult) will ensure a snug fit. The nose band must not be able to slip off the bone and onto the soft tissue (or even be pulled forward if the alpaca scratches its face) under any circumstances. This would cause your alpaca to panic. The alpaca must be comfortable if the halter needs to be on for a long time (without rubbing off fleece or skin) and it should allow the alpaca to eat, drink, ruminate or even yawn – everything it would normally expect to do.



Types of halter

NB. It is worth noting that the size difference between adult alpacas and crias means that it is not the case that one size fits all.

- A) Fixed Nose Band Head Collar: With this halter type, the nose band cannot be adjusted. If the nose band is not large enough to slide up so that it fits snugly in front of the eye, then the nose band may sit too far down the nose. This will be of concern to the alpaca which may be able to think of little else than the pressure of the nose band over the soft tissue of its nose, or worse still its nostrils, affecting its breathing. While the crown piece can be adjusted, it still may not allow a nose band which is too small to sit in the correct position. Therefore it may simply clamp the alpaca's mouth shut, which could also stop it from eating, drinking, ruminating – and breathing!
- B) X-Style Halter: With this halter type, the crown piece and nose band form a continuous loop & neither can be adjusted independently of the other. In this way, by loosening the crown piece, the nose band is also slackened, which can allow the nose band to slip forward and become unsafe. Without a variety of sizes available, it is difficult to obtain the correct fit, particularly for an alpaca which is being halter trained to walk on a halter for the first time. This can be inconvenient. However, this type of halter can fit a wide variety of head sizes and shapes.
- C) Adjustable Halter: In this case, both the nose band and crown piece can be adjusted independently. A short cheek piece will prevent the nose band from slipping forwards, especially when in conjunction with the throat latch and nose band travelling through the same ring under the chin. If fitted with buckles, it is also more likely to remain in the original position.

The adjustable type of halter seems to offer the greatest versatility in fitting alpacas of all head types – with both ease of fitting and safety paramount.

Fitting and adjusting a halter

- Adjust the nose band to its widest setting before putting it on your alpaca. In this way, it can slide up the nose to just in front of the eye, where it will be safest.

- Tighten the crown piece high up behind the ears – this will give maximum control and contact while you are leading your alpaca. Bear in mind that the halter has to stay high on the nose – no matter what.
- Take any slack out of the nose band, allowing enough room for normal activity such as feeding. NB A larger alpaca will need more slack around the jaw. Generally, if you can get your index and middle finger between the jaw and the nose band, an adult should be comfortable. Less room is needed for a cria to ruminate, etc.
- If the alpaca is in full fleece, the fleece will compress, and the crown piece will almost certainly need tightening in a few minutes.
- In hot weather, the material of certain halters can expand slightly (nylon can expand by 30% of its length), further necessitating adjustment after a few minutes.

In an unsupervised situation – such as in the field – it is not felt to be advisable to leave the halter on your alpaca (Joint Health & Welfare Committee 2006).

Alpacas are intelligent creatures and can remember the experience of a badly fitting halter. This can make them reluctant to be haltered again and can cause behavioural problems such as: cushing, bolting, rearing and/or panicking when the halter is put on. For all alpacas (and especially crias) beginning their handling training, it is imperative to:

- 1) have a correctly fitting halter, and
- 2) to take the time to fit the halter correctly.

This will allow your alpaca to become quicker to train and easier to handle.

Please remember that even the correct size halter becomes dangerous and useless if not adjusted correctly.

This article has been written with the help and advice of Marty McGee Bennett (Camelidynamics)

Vicki Agar
BAS Health and Welfare Committee
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