

8-1-2007

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Recommended Citation

Daly, Russ, "Heat Stress, Fairs, and Achievement Days: Animal Considerations" (2007). *Extension Extra*. Paper 396.
http://openprairie.sdstate.edu/extension_extra/396

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Heat Stress, Fairs, and Achievement Days: Animal Considerations

Russ Daly, DVM, Extension Veterinarian

Animals shown at achievement days and fairs may be at increased risk for heat stress compared to their counterparts left at home. Transporting, showing, and handling in hot and humid weather may predispose animals to heat stress and possibly serious health consequences.

With the exception of horses, animals shown at fairs and achievement days (cattle, dogs and cats, pigs, poultry, rabbits, sheep and goats) do not perspire and cannot regulate body temperature that way. If conditions are hot and humid, their body temperatures will peak in late afternoon and early evening hours.

The most important way to reduce the risk of heat stress is to avoid transporting, handling, and showing during afternoon and early evening hours. This may mean changing checking-in or checking-out and showing schedules to morning hours, when animals' body temperature are lower.

Species-specific heat stress considerations

Cattle

Signs of heat stress: Panting, open-mouth breathing, excessive salivation, lack of coordination, trembling, high rectal temperature (>104°F).

How to help: Offer shade, fans, plenty of drinking water, sprinklers that provide large droplets. Sprinklers throwing out a mist only contribute to the humidity. Research indicates that cattle under heat stress should be sprinkled with enough water to soak them completely every 5 minutes.

Dogs and cats

Signs of heat stress: Excessive panting (dogs), open-mouth breathing (cats), muscle cramps, deep red mucous membrane color (or becoming pale and dry), weakness, excessive salivation, high rectal temperature (>104°F).

How to help: Offer shade, fans, small frequent amounts of drinking water, run cool water over belly and groin area.

Horses

Signs of heat stress: Profuse sweating, rapid breathing, rapid heart rate, panting, high rectal temperature (>104°F).

How to help: Offer shade, fans, run cool water on legs, offer frequent small amounts of drinking water.

Pigs

Signs of heat stress: Panting, open-mouth breathing, high rectal temperature (>104°F).

How to help: Offer shade, fans, plentiful drinking water, sprinklers that provide large droplets. Do not use sprinklers continuously (cycle 2 minutes on, 2 minutes off).

Poultry

Signs of heat stress: Heavy panting, lifting wings away from body, darkened skin color due to blood being brought to the skin.

How to help: Offer shade, fans, cool plentiful drinking water.

Rabbits

Signs of heat stress: Rapid breathing, stretching out on floor.

How to help: Offer shade, fans, plentiful drinking water, sprinklers, mist ears with water.

Sheep and goats

Signs of heat stress: Rapid breathing rate, panting, inability to stand, weakness, high rectal temperature (>104°F).

How to help: Offer shade, fans, plentiful drinking water, use rubbing alcohol on wool-less areas in flank and between rear legs. **Do not spray sheep with water.** If wool becomes wet, air cannot flow properly over the skin for evaporative cooling. For goats, run cool water over the back of the head.

Summary

Any animal exhibiting signs of severe heat stress should be examined and treated by a veterinarian after these "first aid" steps are employed. Exhibitors also need to be careful for themselves when these conditions exist. People should drink plenty of fluids and seek shade in hot, humid weather.

Fairs and achievement days are opportunities to showcase animal care and welfare to the public at large. Common-sense measures can ensure animal safety, and maintaining flexibility with schedules is of utmost importance during extreme weather conditions.

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