

NEW YORK STATE 4-H DAIRY GOAT PROJECT FACT SHEET #9

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DISBUDDING

Disbudding the kids in your herd so they will not grow up to have horns is a necessary management practice in most herds. Goats use their horns mainly for fighting. Every day, as a regular practice, the members of a herd will butt their heads together to establish a pecking order. If they are horned, injury may occur to one or both of the goats involved. Horned goats may also injure their handlers. **Always milk a horned goat in a milking stand with a headlock or stanchion.** Otherwise, the goat can accidentally hit your head with her horns if flies bother her and she makes a swipe at her side while your head is against her belly as you milk.

Many goat owners believe that they can eliminate the problem of horns by breeding goats that are naturally hornless (polled). However, some does and bucks that are naturally polled are also infertile and are of no use to the owner, either as breeding stock or milk producers. (See future fact sheet on Genetics).

A good time to disbud your kid is when he or she is 3 to 7 days old. At this age it is easy to do a good job of disbudding and the disbudding process will also be less of a shock. The horn bud (beginning of the horn) on a young kid can be felt with your finger as a piece of immovable skin fixed on the top of the kid's head. If you buy your kid when it is 3 weeks old, you can still disbud it, but you may need to use a larger diameter iron and leave it on longer and there is more chance of doing an incomplete job and ending up with scurs. Scurs are little, tiny horns. They generally have a twisted or deformed appearance and break off easily.

Using an electric disbudding iron

The most common and recommended method of disbudding is with an electric disbudding iron. This is a circular hot iron that is plugged into a wall socket. The circular tip of the iron should be about $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch to one inch in diameter. After plugging in the iron, heat the rod until it is a cherry red color and easily burns a piece of wood. **If you trim the hair over the horn buds, disbudding will go faster and cause less smoke.** Restrain the kid in a disbudding crate or towel held by a friend. Place the circular end of the iron firmly over the horn buds for 10-20 seconds until you see a "copper ring". This will destroy the horn cells and prevent the horn from growing.

Non-electric ways to disbud a kid

If you do not have electricity available, there are disbudding irons that can be heated by a propane torch or campfire.

You can also use a chemical paste. First, the hair covering the horn bud must be clipped away. Then a paste of potassium hydroxide (KOH) is rubbed over the area of the horn bud, making sure that none gets on your hands or it will burn your skin! Cover the burn area with a thin layer of petroleum jelly to prevent spreading onto the kid's face. The paste will destroy the horn cells and prevent growth. **There are, however, many problems with this method.** It is more painful for the kid and the paste may rub off onto other animals, causing burns and possibly blindness. If this method is used, the kid being disbudded should be isolated from the rest of the herd for one to two days.

If the horns are allowed to grow on your goat for a time before being removed, you must dehorn the goat rather than disbud it. Dehorning is much more involved and must be done by your veterinarian. The animal is given an injection to numb the area around the horns. Then the horn is removed by using a small wire saw. This procedure usually involves a lot of bleeding. Where each horn was, a hole is left going down into the goat's head into its sinus cavities. These holes can take a long time to heal. Dehorning is done in late fall or winter to prevent flies from attacking the open holes and laying eggs in them. The eggs will hatch out into little white worms called maggots that will feed on the open sores. Gross!!!!

PLEASE keep in mind that the faster the disbudding is done after birth, the less pain it will cause both you and the kid. **So...DON'T WAIT!!** Do it as soon as you can distinguish the horn buds.

Dairy goats with horns are not allowed to enter shows in the United States. However, some shows will allow you to show meat goats that have had their horns **tipped** rather than removed. Tipping means the top few inches of horn have been cut off. Hoof nippers used for trimming horse hooves work well for tipping. Tipping should be done at least a month before exhibiting the goat to give the tips time to heal.

Suggested Activities

- 1) Have members take turns locating the horn buds on a few kids of different ages, and identifying polled versus naturally horned kids.
- 2) Have someone demonstrate to your club how to use an electric disbudding iron and methods of restraining kids.*
- 3) Disbud goat kids or assist in the process.
- 4) Examine a goat horn that has been removed from an older goat.*

* Activity is suitable for Clover Buds.