

## FACTSHEET: OWNERS

# FEEDING THE ELDERLY DONKEY

*Many donkeys live until 30 years and beyond and the accepted classification for a 'geriatric' donkey is one that is over 20 years old. This is more the case in donkeys kept as companions rather than as working donkeys, but in both situations they deserve, and need, special care.*

*The thick coat of the donkey and its stoic nature often means that problems go unnoticed and a drop in body condition or even a loss of appetite may not be easily visible.*

*They need free access to food and fresh clean water at all times and it is important to note that the nutrient requirements change as the donkey ages, along with their ability to chew long fibres. Supplementary feed may become necessary.*

### Health checks for the elderly donkey

- Carry out body condition scoring regularly so that any trends can be identified and then monitored. It is important to remember that you should use the specific body condition scoring tool for donkeys, rather than the tool for horses and ponies, and that it is important to use your hands because the thick coat can hide any loss of condition.

See Factsheet: *Donkey body condition score chart.*

- A feed test is always a good idea; give the donkey some feed and watch to make sure that it does have an appetite, can chew and does swallow the food. Watch carefully for sham eating and check for quidding.



**Sham eating is giving the impression of prehension, mastication and swallowing whilst actually ingesting very little**



**Quidding is the dropping of balls of well-chewed food into the feed trough, bucket or on the floor instead of swallowing it.**

- If in doubt a check of the fibre length in a faeces sample will give a very good indication of the function of the digestive tract. A faecal fibre length of just under 2mm is normal, if it is over 3.6mm the donkey is likely to have limited dental function.
- Regular checks of the dental function is essential and either a vet or a dental technician should carry out checks every 6 months and appropriate treatment where necessary.
- Donkeys have specific requirements, which are often very different to those of horses and ponies, and it is important to be aware of these.



See Factsheet: *Donkey dental care*

## FEEDING THE ELDERLY DONKEY



### TIPS FOR FEEDING

- Continually assess your donkey's body condition, using the donkey specific body condition scoring chart, and make changes to their diet accordingly.
- Make sure that fresh, clean water is available at all times. It is important to ensure your donkey is drinking enough, sometimes in the winter donkeys may not want to drink very cold water and you may need to provide tepid water to tempt them.
- Always introduce changes to the diet gradually and watch your donkey to ensure that it is eating.
- Meals of less than 500g of supplementary feed are ideal for a 200Kg donkey. Try to avoid feeding as one meal, small frequent meals are best.
- If you are not feeding a forage balancer, ensure that the donkeys have access to an equine specific non-molassed mineral lick.

## FEEDING THE ELDERLY DONKEY

### Long fibre replacement

Donkeys have evolved to eat fibrous plant materials in small quantities throughout the day; this is known as trickle feeding and helps to keep the donkey's digestive system healthy and to keep the donkey occupied. When donkeys have poor teeth and are finding long fibres difficult to chew it is important to provide them with an alternative source of fibre; a short chop product.

These products may be used to replace some or all of the donkey's straw, hay or haylage ration. Short chopped chaff products are easier to chew and generally very soft enabling them to be eaten by donkeys with dental problems. Some donkeys may struggle even with short chopped chaff and may need a product that can be soaked down to form a sloppy consistency.



### High fibre pellets

A number of high fibre pellets (may also be known as fibre cubes or fibre nuts) can be soaked to form a soup like consistency; they can be soaked for up to 30 minutes and are easy for elderly donkeys to manage. When selecting a high fibre pellet it is important to choose one that is safe for laminitics, most feed manufacturers will be happy to advise on this.

Generally if donkeys are given products to replace or be fed alongside long fibres such as straw and hay/haylage they will cope very well, however, in some cases they may require other supplementary products.

### Other supplementary feeds

Some donkeys may require more calories than those that can be provided by a fibrous diet alone and may need additional feeds. There are a number of high energy alfalfa based chop products such as Alfa A, that may be used to supplement part of the fibre ration. Alfalfa products are not suitable for older donkeys with poor liver function; a vet can take blood samples to check liver function. Alfalfa can also be quite hard to chew, so be aware that donkeys with poor teeth may be at risk of choking. Vegetable oil based products are also an ideal way to 'top up' the energy content of a diet for donkeys without liver disease. The nutritional value of a feed can be increased by adding small amounts of soya or vegetable oil (up to 100ml per day). There are also high oil-based pellet products available that are excellent sources of calories, it is important to choose a cereal grain free product and feed in small quantities according to manufacturer's instructions.

Although it is often tempting to feed cereal grain based coarse mixes they tend to be too high in energy and starch and too low in fibre so their use is not recommended. Feeding such products has been shown to be associated with an increased risk of problems such as gastric ulceration, laminitis and obesity. They can also be difficult for donkeys with poor teeth to chew causing them to choke.

## Feed balancers

Feed balancers are useful for donkeys on a forage only diet in providing them with the essential protein, vitamins and minerals that they may need. Some balancers will help with condition gain while other balancers will not promote weight gain and can be used as an important part of a weight reduction programme. When first introducing a balancer we recommended dampening it to prevent the donkey from bolting it down too quickly and choking.

## Appetizing additions

Although donkeys are generally good eaters and enjoy most feeds given to them some elderly donkeys may need the addition of some extra 'goodies' to tempt them. It is important to only offer treats that elderly donkeys can manage. To tempt fussy donkeys, carrots, bananas and apples are invaluable; however, donkeys with poor teeth may struggle with them. Grated carrots and apples are ideal, however if this is not practical mashed, tinned carrots may be used or small amounts of unsweetened apple sauce may be helpful.

Donkeys enjoy soaked sugar beet added as a 'top dressing' to their normal diet. It is important to select an unmolassed sugar beet as the sugar content in traditional molassed sugar beet is too high for donkeys and may predispose them to problems such as laminitis. Another way to tempt fussy feeders is to use peppermint cordial, small amounts of this potent liquid are ideal to add to feeds to provide a pleasant aroma and taste for donkeys, this is particularly useful if you are trying to disguise medications.

Donkeys love polos and ginger biscuits, these products are great to tempt fussy feeders but care should be taken not to feed too many as they are very high in sugar and may lead to obesity and associated health problems. Older donkeys with poor teeth will also struggle to eat them.