



EUTHANASIA AND DEALING WITH DEATH

Assessing quality of life and planning for the end.

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While the death of a treasured animal friend is always sad, you should never think of euthanasia as a failure of your care. Choosing to say goodbye at the right time may be the final selfless act of care for your donkey.

Making the decision to euthanase your donkey is extremely hard. It can lead to feelings of guilt alongside the normal mourning process. However, there are certain things that you need to consider before euthanasia and after the death of a donkey. It is better to plan for these than to wait until the time comes, when you may be too stressed and emotional to deal with the practicalities.

This factsheet aims to help you with your decision to say goodbye and with the details you need to consider.

WHAT IS **EUTHANASIA**?

Euthanasia (also known as 'putting an animal to sleep') is an important final act in the care of your donkey. It is always a sad decision, but it is a decision you need to make when your donkey's quality of life deteriorates, or if your donkey no longer has a 'good life'.

HOW IS **QUALITY OF LIFE ASSESSED**?



Serious illness, injury or welfare issues can affect a donkey at any age, having a negative impact on its quality of life. If this happens, euthanasia is the kindest option.

Donkeys are very stoic in nature, which means they are good at hiding their pain. As donkeys age, painful conditions like arthritis, dental disease, foot problems and breathing problems become more common. These conditions can easily go unnoticed and a donkey's quality of life may deteriorate gradually. For this reason, you should monitor your donkey carefully and regularly for any subtle changes in behaviour.

Keep a diary of your donkey's behaviour to check for changes and to highlight any decline. Although each donkey is different, think about the following points when assessing your donkey's quality of life.

Is your donkey:

- Moving around freely and comfortably, particularly when turned out?
- Able to lie down and get up without help or difficulty?
- Able to roll without difficulty?
- Eating and chewing comfortably?
- Breathing comfortably?
- Maintaining a healthy weight?
- Displaying normal behaviour?
- Generally healthy?
- Bullied by other animals in the herd?
- Suffering from conditions that affect its physical or mental wellbeing?
- On any long term medication?
- 'Happy'?

You can record answers to these questions in The Donkey Sanctuary quality of life assessment pack. The pack helps you check for changes or trends, and has information that you will find useful when talking with vets or other animal health care professionals.



See Factsheet: [Monitoring your donkey's quality of life](#) for our assessment pack.

The Donkey Sanctuary's donkey welfare advisers can offer advice and support on caring for an older donkey. You can also speak to vets and animal health professionals. Your vet can perform an annual geriatric health check. This is a good time to discuss any medical issues and how your vet thinks they are affecting your donkey's quality of life.

Growing Old Gracefully is a film aimed at owners of older donkeys and provides advice and guidance on the specific care needs of donkeys that are aged over 20 years old and common ailments that may affect them. We feel that with all the care in place elderly donkeys can lead happy and comfortable lives. So please, enjoy your donkey and be there for them when they need you most.

PLANNING **AHEAD**

You should make a plan for euthanasia sooner rather than later, while your donkey is still healthy. It is better to deal with the practical aspects of euthanasia in advance, rather than tackling them at such a difficult time.

Discuss the options with family members to make sure you all agree when the time comes.

HOW WILL **IT BE DONE?**

Speak to your vet about methods of euthanasia and decide on a preferred option. Donkeys are usually put to sleep by injection of an anaesthetic-type drug into the vein.

An alternative method is by firearm, using a captive-bolt gun or free-bullet. However, firearms require specific licencing so are less readily available. Whether you choose euthanasia by injection or by firearm, both methods are equally humane and effective.

THE LOCATION

Consider the best place for euthanasia. The chosen area should be safe and familiar to your donkey to reduce any stress, and preferably with soft ground.

Think about how easy it will be to remove the body, especially from areas that are small or difficult to access, such as stables.

STAYING WITH YOUR DONKEY

You may find it upsetting to stay with your donkey during the procedure. It is okay if you do not want to witness your donkey being put to sleep.

If this is the case, your vet may be able to bring an assistant with them, or you may have a friend with donkey experience who can assist the vet. Ask them whether they would be happy to do this for you.

If your donkey gets distressed in the presence of strangers or vets, an oral sedative given before euthanasia can help. A vet must prescribe the sedative, so speak with them beforehand.

BURIAL OR CREMATION

You can bury your pet donkey at home but there are certain restrictions to consider, such as not burying near a water course. Different regions of the UK have different rules regarding the burial of animals.

Check these in advance to avoid problems and time delays later. It is important to consider the practicalities of creating a grave.

Cremation is another option, although it can be costly.

Your vet will be able to offer you information on local services, including collection of the body.

HOW CAN YOU **HELP YOUR BEREAVED DONKEY?**

Donkeys form strong bonds with their companions. For companions to come to terms with the death of a friend, they must be allowed to stay with the body until they have lost interest. The process of acceptance could take some time, possibly even a whole night. Allow at least an hour before removing the body.

Without this opportunity to come to terms with the death, donkeys can experience significant distress and anxiety. They may wander, pace, and bray, as they look for their missing companion. Alternatively, they may become very quiet. It is important to know what is normal for your donkey so you can monitor changes in behaviour if its companion dies.

The stress of bereavement can cause the surviving donkey to stop eating. This can lead to hyperlipaemia, a condition that can be fatal. Closely monitor your bereaved donkey for several weeks as it may take up to three weeks for hyperlipaemia to develop. It is important to call your vet if you are concerned.



See Factsheet: [Hyperlipaemia in Donkeys](#) for more information.

If your donkey is bereaved, extra attention from people and time spent with companions will help.

Monitor your donkey's appetite, but do not offer lots of extra treats. Too many treats can be habit-forming and may lead to obesity. Be aware of your donkey's favourite treats so that in difficult times you know the best food to use to test its appetite.

If your donkey is alone following the death or euthanasia of its friend, you should find a new donkey friend as soon as you can. Always introduce new companions gradually to avoid fighting and reduce stress.

The Donkey Sanctuary's donkey welfare advisers can give advice on the best way to introduce companions.

When looking for a new donkey companion think about your donkey's requirements. Elderly donkeys sometimes do not cope well with new additional donkeys. Consider your own circumstances. Can you afford the costs of another donkey?

Do you have the time, space, and finances to consider a pair? Having a trio of donkeys has its benefits.

If you do decide to obtain a new donkey companion, look for one whose behavioural and physical needs will fit the needs of the companion donkey.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE WITH **THE PASSPORT?**

It is a legal requirement that you inform the relevant Passport Issuing Organisation (PIO) of the death of your donkey. You must return the passport to them within 30 days. If you would like to keep the passport as a memento, many PIOs will return the passport once cancelled, if asked to do so.

Insurance companies may require notification of death. They may ask for the passport before you return it to the PIO. This is particularly important if they will be dealing with a claim.

If you have rehomed a donkey from The Donkey Sanctuary in Great Britain, you must return the passport to the Welfare department.

DEALING WITH **YOUR LOSS?**

Do not underestimate the grieving process. It is not easy to cope with the death of a donkey. For many people it is like losing a very dear friend.

There is no need to feel embarrassed about mourning the loss of your friend. Feelings of deep grief are completely normal. You may find it helpful to talk to family or friends who understand the size of your loss. If you feel you need more dedicated help, there are [specialist pet bereavement counsellors](#) you can contact.

REFERENCES

Government advice on the disposal of animals:

The Equine End of Life Service: www.nfsco.co.uk/equine-endoflife

Guidance on disposal rules:

www.gov.uk/guidance/fallen-stock

www.netregs.org.uk/environmental-topics/waste/animal-by-products-and-food-waste/animal-carcass-disposal

MORE **INFORMATION**

Our skilled and experienced team of welfare advisers are on hand to give advice and appropriate support during office hours. If you're having problems caring for your donkeys or mules, [contact our welfare team](#).