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Management of Donkeys

By Dr John Kohnke BVSc RDA

Donkeys (*Equus asinus*) are members of the horse and zebra family, and share similar body anatomy and digestive physiology. However, they are more efficient at digesting food and can do well on poor quality pasture as compared to a pony of similar body weight. They enjoy browsing on woody, thick-stemmed plants, branches, bark, thistles, blackberry and other coarse grasses and plants which are left by horses and cattle. They are slower movers and lighter framed as compared to ponies of the same size and care must be taken to feed them less feed on a body weight basis. Donkeys also appear to be more efficient at digesting bacterial protein in their hindgut as compared to horses, as the speed through the hindgut of poor quality feed is slowed, which provides a longer fermentation period and better hindgut uptake of protein and other nutrients.

Grain and mixed feeds are not normally recommended for donkeys, although lactating Jennies may require more energy to maintain milk production on poor quality, weedy or dry native pastures. They are prone to obesity and over-weight condition if given an excess of high energy feed. Simply providing clean straw or first cut hay will keep them occupied and quiet. A daily dietary supplement, such as **Kohnke's Own Donkey Supreme**, formulated for donkeys of all ages, is recommended especially for growing and breeding donkeys, as well as working and aged donkeys to provide bone minerals, trace-minerals and vitamins to make up shortfalls in their diets to help maintain bone strength, overall health and vitality.

Handy Hint

A Blend of Hay and Straw is Adequate

Donkeys can digest poorer quality hay and straw because they chew their food more thoroughly than horses to prepare it for digestion and retain the fibre for longer in the hindgut to prolong microbial attack. Blending 25% hay and 75% clean straw (no mould), dampened before feeding to minimise dust, is a suitable maintenance feed for resting donkeys.

Handy Hint

Supplement with Calcium, Trace Minerals and Vitamins.

Where donkeys are fed a blended diet of chaff, hay and straw, a daily supplement of Kohnke's Own Donkey Supreme™ will help to correct low and inadequate levels of important nutrients. It is especially formulated for donkeys of all ages from 5 Supplet® pellets and most will eat the pellets off your hand.

Handy Hint

Feed to Avoid Hyperlipaemia

Whenever donkeys are moved or relocated, it is good management to take enough of the food they are used to for 2-3 days and monitor their appetite and mental state every 12 hours until they settle into the new pasture or environment.

Donkey Behaviour

Donkeys are very social and bond to other donkeys and even horses, sheep, dogs and goats, as well as their human carers. Separation anxiety frequently occurs in donkeys when a companion is removed. If a companion donkey dies, leaving its partner with the body for an hour or so, helps the remaining donkey cope with its loss more quickly, rather than taking it away, as the lone donkey may pine for days and become depressed and go off its feed. Donkeys which are confined to small paddocks or yards must be taken out on a lead at least daily for a walk and relaxing browse. They look forward to a daily walk and will be ready and waiting at a gate at the usual time each day. If you have 2 donkeys, it is best to take them both out together as the one left alone will become noisy and excited. Ideally, you should have a handling yard available as a 'home base' for feeding and routine health care, such as worming and hoof care. **Donkeys do not have a distinct odour and recognize each other by sniffing each other's breath.** **Always allow new donkeys to be introduced by touching noses.** Donkeys make great companion animals and even pets as they are highly intelligent, gentle and placid. They are less flighty as compared to horses and ponies and bond to their owners and children. Unfortunately, because they are so independent, they are often neglected and develop health problems, especially as they age. If a donkey is confined to a small, grazed out paddock, it will be easily bored and become noisy, calling by braying for company or food early in the morning. Donkeys are often considered stubborn to handle, but this is often related to unfamiliar handling and surroundings.

Laminitis/Founder

Like horses, donkeys are very prone to laminitis and founder if allowed to graze lush high 'fructan' sugars in spring pastures or plant regrowth after rain. Management to restrict day time grazing to 1 hour in the morning and evening and confinement at night with a hay/straw blend will help reduce the risk of laminitis, as practiced for ponies or horses.

Hyperlipaemia

Donkeys are at risk of developing hyperlipaemia if starved due to a lack of regular feed during inclement weather, sickness or surgery, or even separation from a companion for as little as 12 hours.

Pregnant Jennies are most prone to hyperlipaemia if the feed is changed, or they are exposed to cold winter weather or develop severe infection, colic or diarrhoea. Hyperlipaemia is more likely to be fatal in donkeys as they do not show sudden changes in demeanor as compared to horses and may not show early symptoms following food restriction.

Internal Parasites

Donkeys are prone to infection with the same internal parasites or 'worms' as horses, although 10 species of Small Strongyles are more prevalent in donkeys. The Lung worm is also more common in donkeys, although it rarely affects horses. Younger donkeys, like horses, are more likely to have burdens of Large Roundworm as compared to mature animals. Donkeys are more prone to the effects of resting Small Strongyles as encysted larvae in the hindgut wall and often develop diarrhoea, loss of condition and 'ill-thrift', especially at the break of the season. Worming twice, 3 weeks apart, with a broad-spectrum wormer will help to reduce worm related colic and loss of condition.

Donkeys are also likely to harbour liver fluke if grazed on wet marshy areas with sheep and cattle, but exhibit few symptoms. Worming for liver fluke with Triclabendazole (12 mg/kg)

under strict veterinary supervision is recommended if detected in the droppings of donkeys which are grazing with sheep.

Handy Hint

Donkeys Harbour Lung Worms

Donkeys often develop lung worm infection without obvious signs that they have been exposed to larvae during their lifetime. They can then act as a reservoir of infection for horses sharing the same pasture. Regular worming with a 'mectin' wormer will help control Lung Worms – all donkeys being introduced to pasture grazed by horses should be wormed just before letting them into the shared pasture. Wormers are given at the same dose rates for horses and donkeys of similar bodyweight.

Teeth Care

Donkeys, like horses, develop sharp edges on the outside of their top 'cheek' teeth and inside edges of their bottom molars as they chew more thoroughly as compared to horses when they feed on straw and dry feed.

Regular checks and rasping are recommended if a donkey 'quids' food or is slow to eat.

Older donkeys require a twice yearly check and rasping, as well as correction of uneven tooth wear

Handy Hint

Feeding a Donkey Treats

Donkeys appreciate treats such as chopped carrots or apples, even a succulent thistle or washed vegetable peelings. Be careful to initially place them into a bowl or on a bag and hold them up for the donkey to take, as the donkey may nip your fingers as 'food' until it quickly learns to carefully and gently accept them.

Handy Hint

Avoiding Queensland Itch in Grazing Donkeys.

Rugging a sensitive donkey overnight from 4pm to 8.00am with a full body rug, neck and head rug is helpful. Washing or spraying the donkey once weekly with a Permethrin wash for 4 weeks will help to control insects. Mixing a menthol gel leg rub (1 tablespoonful in 200ml warm water) in a sealed jar and gently dabbing the menthol solution over the affected areas each evening helps repel sand-flies and midges

Queensland

Itch

Donkeys appear to be more sensitive to sand-fly and midge bites, attracting more insects as compared to horses. They often develop severe "itch" allergies around the borders of their ears and around the tail butt area.

Hoof Problems

As compared to horses, a donkey's hooves are narrower, more upright in the heels with a deeper set frog and softer, more pliable hoof walls with a higher natural moisture content. In the wild, donkeys walk long distances as they browse on plants and shrubs, which helps to wear their hooves to maintain proper hoof shape. Domesticated donkeys are often kept as pets on softer ground and fed on higher 'sugary' grasses, which softens their hooves and spreads them out. The higher non-structural carbohydrate (NSC) intake increases the risk of laminitis and founder, often developing into chronic 'seedy toe', which may need careful and regular trimming and treatment.

Handy Hint

Avoid Recurring Hoof Abscesses.

Hoof abscesses are common in donkeys if their hooves are not trimmed every 6-8 weeks. Regular twice weekly applications of a hoof preparation, such as **Kohnke's Own Hoof Seal®**, will help maintain strong pliable hooves, especially under changing soil moisture conditions.

Avoid Obesity

Donkeys are a naturally thin and trim animal, but if spoiled with high quality grazing or hard feeds, they rapidly gain weight and become obese. Obesity increases the risk of laminitis, lameness and conditions such as Equine Metabolic Disease (EMS) and in older donkeys, Cushing's Disease with high circulating blood insulin levels or insulin resistance (IR).

Restricting feed intake by managing grazing to limit grazing time, keeping pastures short and avoiding feed cereal grain based feeds is essential.

Handy Hint

Health Check Parameters.

Healthy Donkeys have a slightly higher resting heart rate as compared to a pony of similar size. Average Resting Values are;

Normal Temperature - 36.5 – 37.7°C (Critical 38.0°C)

Heart Rate (Pulse Rate) - 31-53

Respiratory Rate - 13-31 (average 20)

Capillary Refil - 1-2 seconds

Ileo-Caecal Contractions - 2-3 per minute

Handy Hint

Avoid Excessive Stress.

Donkeys are generally stressed by handling, so all routine management of worming, hoof care, vaccination etc must be carried out in a non-stressful manner. No dogs, noise or rough handling.

Further Reading:

The most comprehensive Australian book is **Donkey Business III**, by Berry C and Kokas J, (1998), from the Good Samaritan Donkey Sanctuary in Clarence Town NSW. Phone 02 4996 5596. Contact Joanne or Sandy Kokas.

Another is the **Professional Handbook of the Donkey 4th Edition**, published by Svendsen ED. The Donkey Sanctuary, Devon UK (2008). Phone from Australia 0011 44 1359 578222. www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk

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