

Donkey: Nutrition



Donkeys have evolved to live in arid, mountainous, desert areas where feed is sparse and of poor quality. As a consequence, they are excellent at digesting very fibrous plants and can feed off woody shrubs and trees as well as grass. Replication of this natural environment can be very difficult in the UK where donkeys are commonly kept as companion or leisure animals on lush, grass-rich pastures.

Every donkey should be fed according to their body condition, age, underlying health issues, time of year and grazing availability. Inappropriate feeding can lead to boredom, obesity and the potentially serious health issues that occur as a consequence of this.

Forage

Donkeys have a natural appetite for eating large quantities (1.3-1.8% bodyweight daily) of highly fibrous forages and suffer from boredom if they cannot satisfy this appetite. In order to avoid weight gain the most appropriate food stuff is good quality barley straw, as it is low in energy and high in fibre.

Donkeys with good teeth should have access to straw at all times. This can be combined with up to 25% hay or haylage dependent on body condition. During times of increased energy needs, e.g. winter, pregnancy, lactation or growth, hay or haylage can replace up to 50% of their forage by weight.

Any hay/haylage should be late cut, high in fibre and visibly coarse. Always ensure that it is of good quality and is not dusty or mouldy.

Grazing

Strict control must be kept of access to actively growing grass (March – October). Strip grazing, pasture rotation and grazing with other species e.g. sheep can be very effective. When grazing is not available straw should always be provided.

Supplementation

A diet consisting of grass, straw and hay/haylage may be lacking in vital vitamins, minerals and proteins that a donkey needs. Addition of a multi-supplement donkey forage balancer ensures a balanced diet, without the addition of excess calories that are not required. Balancers can be fed to donkeys from the age of three weeks.



FORAGING IN BARLEY STRAW – HIGH IN FIBRE AND PREVENTS BOREDOM

KEY POINTS

- Donkeys have different physical and psychological needs compared to ponies.
- Most donkeys should receive a diet of 75% (by weight) barley straw and 25% hay or haylage, plus a vitamin and mineral balancer.
- Access to pasture should be limited in spring and summer.
- Dieting should always be undertaken in a slow and controlled manner. Sudden and rapid weight loss can make a donkey seriously ill.
- Body condition scoring (BCS) enables monitoring of diet suitability (see separate factsheet on BCS).

Browsing

Donkeys enjoy access to hedgerows and trees and will eat those plants that are safe e.g. hazel, ash, hawthorn and apple. Enrichment of the environment with branches, twigs and logs from safe plants is recommended for all donkeys who have limited access to grazing. Alleviating boredom at these times may help to avoid a donkey using fencing and stabling as alternative sources of amusement.

Body Condition Scoring (BCS)

The most effective way of monitoring a donkey's size is to perform a BCS; ideally this should be performed on a weekly basis. Taking girth measurements can also help to monitor weight.

Donkeys store fat in different areas to horses, with the crest, rump and flanks being the most common areas.

Directions on how to body condition score a donkey can be found in the XLEquine factsheet entitled "Body Condition Scoring the Donkey" or at www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk.



**AN OBESE DONKEY
- NOTE THE CREST AND BACK FAT PADS**

OVERWEIGHT DONKEYS

Obesity in the donkey population is unfortunately a common problem, due to a combination of feeding high energy diets and a lack of work/physical exercise.

Donkeys with high BCS should have their diet adjusted to achieve gradual controlled weight loss. In addition to diet, other factors should also be considered, such as lack of exercise, companion issues and mental stimulation.

An overweight donkey with good teeth should be offered free access to barley straw, together with a forage balancer and very limited access to grass during the summer months. Regular exercise, either ridden or in hand, should be undertaken and donkeys should be encouraged to 'work' for their food. Hiding treats in the bedding, providing stable toys and using track strip grazing areas can all be effective.

Weight loss can be slow in donkeys, especially in the initial stages. Rapid dietary restriction and weight loss can make a donkey ill and therefore gradual loss should be encouraged.

Many XLEquine practices regularly liaise with The Donkey Sanctuary with regard to treatment and management of donkeys. XLEquine would like to acknowledge the work they do to transform the quality of life of donkeys in the UK and abroad. The Donkey Sanctuary is a charity that will never turn away from a donkey in need. They rely on donations to continue providing for donkeys and mules worldwide.

www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk



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