



Key Points for Owners of Donkeys or Mules

Donkeys and mules require the same good animal care for their health and well-being as do horses. Several key points are listed below, including how these equines differ from horses.

Facilities and Housing

Donkeys and mules need shelter from rain, snow and windy conditions. The thick, dense hair coat of donkeys makes them particularly vulnerable to cold, damp weather. Donkeys do not have the extra protective undercoat that horses have to repel moisture. Most mules, however, have a coat like a horse, including the protective undercoat. In winter, donkeys should be provided with an enclosed shelter and ample bedding.

Donkeys are social animals and benefit from the company of other equines. Some donkeys and mules may become depressed or apathetic when isolated from a former companion. This can have health implications, particularly if they go off feed.

Feed and Water

To maintain donkeys in good condition, they should be fed grass types of hay. Lush pastures and high quality legume hay is not recommended for these equines. Donkeys can be prone to obesity and certain conditions, such as laminitis and hyperlipemia, which can be fatal if not properly treated.

Concentrates are seldom needed except for young donkeys, nursing jennets and older donkeys. Salt and minerals are necessary for donkeys and mules to maintain good health and vigour.

It is essential that clean water is provided. Donkeys and mules are likely to limit their water intake to the point of dehydration unless clean drinking water is provided.

Health and Reproduction

Donkeys tend to be stoic. They often do not show behavioural signs indicative of illness until the condition is advanced. In donkeys and mules, a reduced or loss of appetite is a significant concern.

Like horses, donkeys and mules need routine care. Ensure proper trimming is done every 8-12 weeks or as may be needed for individuals. The time between hoof trims will depend on factors such as ground conditions, activity level, nutrition and age. Consult a veterinarian for advice on vaccinations and deworming.

The gestation period for jennets is 365 days (+/- 20 days).

Jacks should only be handled by experienced horsepeople and can be very aggressive during breeding. Jacks should also have good basic ground skills and understand commands prior to being used for hand breeding. For pasture breeding, it is important to be aware of the breeding behaviour of jacks and mares/jennets. For instance, jacks typically bite the jennet/mare - while it may be possible to minimize this with training the behaviour is part of the animal's breeding behaviour.

Handling

Historically, donkeys lived in rugged regions. When they were threatened, they simply stood still and tried to blend into the landscape rather than bolt. To this day, when a donkey or mule feels threatened, they are likely to stop and assess the situation. This is often incorrectly interpreted as stubbornness. By contrast, the horse relies on "flight" and its instinct is to run away from perceived threats. Donkeys and mules are extremely intelligent. They respond well to positive training methods.