

WHAT SHOULD YOU FEED YOUR DONKEYS?

In their natural habitat donkeys will browse, eating highly fibrous plant material in small quantities throughout the day. During the spring and summer the donkeys at The Donkey Sanctuary have access to restricted grazing. In addition to the restricted grazing they always have access to barley straw to ensure they are getting plenty of fibre. The amount of grass donkeys have access to is controlled; either by strip grazing using electric fencing or by co-grazing with other species to prevent them getting too fat.

During the winter months they are housed in large airy barns with concrete run out yards, without access to grass. Instead they have free access to barley straw and are fed a controlled amount of hay or haylage according to body condition. Old or sick donkeys may be fed additional high fibre feeds and supplements in special circumstances to maintain their body weight.

If your donkeys have access to grass all year round then very little hay will be required, even during the winter months. Control the amount of grass and hay they have each day to maintain ideal body condition. Grazing should always be considered as supplementary to straw which should make up the majority of a healthy donkey's diet.

Straw

We recommend feeding quality barley straw as it is high in fibre and low in sugar, and closely resembles what a donkey would eat in the wild. Constant access to straw will allow a donkey to eat to appetite without consuming too many calories and therefore risk putting on excess weight which has associated risks of developing laminitis and hyperlipaemia. Oat straw may be useful for old or underweight donkeys as this usually has a slightly higher nutritional value than barley straw; wheat straw is very fibrous and has lower energy values, but may be fed to young healthy donkeys with a good set of teeth. Linseed straw is best avoided since the seed is poisonous unless it has been boiled, and it is very difficult to ensure that no seed is present in the straw. If straw is in short supply then priority must be given to using it as a feed source and an alternative bedding should be used.

Hay

If you anticipate feeding hay during the winter months then you need to plan ahead and make sure you have enough in store to see you through the winter as supplies can run out before the winter is over. Never feed mouldy hay, and try and build up a good relationship with your hay supplier, this will ensure you have a consistent supply of good, clean hay suitable for feeding to your donkeys. Different types of hay available include:

- Meadow Hay is a natural mix of grasses made from grass grown on old pasture and is good for feeding to donkeys.
- Seed Hay is also good for donkeys. It is a planted crop of specific grasses, such as rye or timothy; which the farmer makes from the stems remaining after the grain has been taken.
- Hay produced from cow pasture will usually have higher energy levels and may be less suitable if fed on its own. However it could be fed mixed with a higher ratio of straw.

Ragwort in hay is VERY poisonous to donkeys, but unfortunately quite hard to distinguish once it has dried, this is why it is important to know and trust your hay supplier. For more information on ragwort control and identification read the Ragwort Kills – information for owners factsheet found on The Donkey Sanctuary website. Weather conditions control the cutting season (late May to July). Remember that late cut hay will have lower energy values, which may suit your donkeys if they are overweight, but not if they are elderly/ underweight and need feeding up. If the hay is cut later in the year a lot of the goodness will have gone out of the grass and some of the grass will have gone to seed. This type of hay is much lower in energy value than early cut hay and for that reason it is fine for feeding to donkeys. If the weather in May is good the farmers might make hay in the first week of June and get a second cut at the end of July. This 'second cut' hay is usually lower in energy value and again is fine for most donkeys.

Freshly cut hay should be stored in a dry barn for at least three months before feeding. Do not suddenly introduce freshly cut hay as it could cause colic and laminitis. Reduce the risk by mixing the new hay with the previous year's hay, or mix it with straw over a few days so there is a gradual change over. If hay is in short supply in your area (or if it is very expensive) then you could look at the following alternatives.

Haylage

Haylage is semi-wilted grass that has been allowed to dry to only 55-65% dry matter (as compared to 85% in hay). The grass is baled, compressed and sealed in tough plastic and the resultant forage is virtually dust-free, highly palatable and nutritious. Once the plastic wrapping is broken (deliberately or accidentally) fungal spores start to grow so once opened the haylage must be used within 3-4 days (less in warm weather) or discarded. If there are any signs of mould or yeast growth on a bale once opened it should be discarded, as should any uneaten haylage.

Haylage can be very variable in terms of nutritional levels, some haylage may be too high in energy to feed to donkeys. If you are unsure about the suitability of locally available haylage we would recommend having it analysed (most of the large horse feed companies provide this service for a small fee) or feeding a commercially available equine haylage marketed as 'laminitic safe'.

Silage

Silage is not suitable for feeding to donkeys as the moisture level is usually too high, with a low pH, a low fibre and high protein level.

High fibre cubes

There are many brands on the market. Products marketed for equines prone to laminitis are a good choice as they are usually high fibre and low sugar. High fibre cubes are a good choice if you need more than grass, hay and straw to build up the weight of an old or thin donkey. Care must be taken that the donkey does not eat the cubes too quickly, which may cause colic, so add water and mix with a small quantity of low sugar chaff when introducing cubes for the first time. High fibre cubes can be soaked down to a mash which is particularly useful for donkeys who have poor teeth. Avoid any cubes which contain cereals as these are not suitable for feeding to donkeys. Products marketed as 'mixes' are usually cereal based and again not suitable.

Short chop chaff products

Chaff is a mixture of chopped up hay and/or straw and there are many types of chaff on the market. These contain variable amounts of chopped rye, timothy or alfalfa grasses & oat straw. Some have added oil, molasses, minerals, herbs or hoof growth supplements whilst others are high fibre and molasses free. Chaff products marketed for equines prone to laminitis are useful for donkeys that have difficulty eating grass, hay and straw due to poor dentition, and can be used as feed supplements or fed ad lib as a total hay/straw replacer. Always choose a chaff which is 'laminitic safe' and preferably with a sugar content of less than 8%.

Dried sugar beet pulp

Sugar beet is useful fed in small amounts to tempt a sick donkey to eat. Sugar beet is a useful source of succulent, nutritious, digestible fibre when added to the feed, although it cannot replace hay or one of its alternatives. We recommend un-molassed sugar beet to avoid laminitis. Dried sugar beet pulp is available in shredded or cubed form and MUST be thoroughly soaked before feeding and used within 24 hours once wet. Soaking times vary so refer to manufacturer's instructions. There are now some quick-soak un-molassed sugar beet products on the market which soak in under 10 minutes (although it's always advisable to check the product is fully soaked before use).

Succulents

Fruit and vegetables can be fed in small amounts (1 or 2 a day) to provide variety and encourage appetite; and are a worthwhile addition to the normal ration in winter and early spring when fresh grass is not available. Avoid feeding potatoes, anything from the brassica family, onions, leeks, garlic, stoned fruit and anything which is old, fermented or mouldy. Carrots, apples, bananas, pears, turnips and swedes are all safe and usually very popular with donkeys! Ensure that chopped fruit and vegetables are cut in a way that minimises the risk of choking, such as sticks not rounds.

Minerals and Vitamins

Donkeys usually obtain all of the required vitamins and minerals from the straw, grass and hay in their diets. However, we recommend that they have free access to an equine mineralized block, which contains various

minerals including salt to supplement their diet all year round to prevent any deficiencies. Blocks designed for other livestock may be dangerous for donkeys as some contain inappropriate mineral levels.

Water

Water is perhaps the most essential of all nutrients since without it life cannot continue for longer than a few days (or less in adverse conditions). Clean, fresh water should be freely available at all times. Do remember to check water supplies in cold weather to ensure they have not frozen. Some donkeys, particularly the old or unwell, don't like drinking very cold water, so it may be a good idea to provide warm water in the winter if you are not sure if your donkey is drinking enough. If possible provide access to several sources of water to increase the choices available to your donkey thereby enriching their environment and encouraging them to drink sufficient amounts.

General Considerations

- All feed stuffs should be of high quality.
- All equines are sensitive to toxins that can be found in spoiled feeds.
- All feed stuffs should be free from mould.
- All changes to diet should be made gradually. Over at least 7-14 days.
- Donkeys prefer to browse for their bulk and fibre throughout the day.
- Donkeys prefer to eat little and often. Provide ad-lib barley straw.
- Do not over feed your donkey - check the body condition of your donkey regularly.
- Donkeys do not need high levels of sugar in their diets.
- If in any doubt about the energy value or the quality of any feed, it is advisable to seek expert advice.
- Always provide a mineral lick and permanent access to a clean water supply.
- NEVER feed grass clippings and ensure that your neighbours also know not to as they can lead to colic.

*For more information about Nutrition and Pasture Management please ring the **welfare advice line on 01395 578222.***