

BRANSBY
— HORSES —

Caring For Your **Donkey**

**Transforming the lives
of equines together**



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Introduction

Contrary to popular belief, donkeys are not just small horses with big ears! Whilst both species evolved from the same ancestors, they have each evolved to be very different.

Donkeys vary both physically and behaviourally from horses and as such, the day to day care they require is different to that you would give to a horse. Donkeys are a fantastic addition to your family; full of character and fun to get to know.

Donkeys by nature, are very stoic and as a result, are extremely good at hiding signs of pain and illness so it can be difficult to notice that something is wrong. It is important to get to know your donkey and what his or her normal behaviours are so that you can spot early signs that something could be wrong more easily.



Donkeys will tend not to show much fear response to unfamiliar situations compared to horses, and this lack of physical response of fear can be mistaken for stubbornness.

The average lifespan of a donkey is around 30 years, with any over the age of 20 being considered as 'older donkeys' (The Donkey Sanctuary, 2016).

Donkeys form lifelong friendships with their own kind, forming pair bonds. This can cause issues should one of the pair be taken away for any reason. The bray is one of six sounds a donkey makes. The others are the growl, grunt, squeal, whuffle and snort. The bray is the loudest and can be heard over long distances. Each donkey's bray is individual to that donkey. In the wild the bray appears to be used mainly by male donkeys as a territorial display; in domestication, both male and female donkeys bray for various reasons, including learned behaviour, where the donkey believes braying is effective at getting human attention and/or food.

The normal stats for a donkey are around the following ranges:

Heart Rate: 44bpm

Respiration Rate: 20 bpm

Temperature: 37.1 ° Celsius

However, it can vary from animal to animal so it is important to get to know what is normal for your donkey. The following document is a useful guide on the basic health, care and welfare a donkey requires and some health concerns to look out for.

We have put this guide together to cover the basics of good donkey management, and help you understand the needs of these equines.

If you have space for a donkey in your life, please visit BransbyHorses.co.uk/rehoming to view our available equines. You can also contact us for more information or queries regarding anything contained in this document, Monday to Friday on **01427 788 464** or email **rehoming@bransbyhorses.co.uk**

Dental Care

Dental issues can be common in donkeys and can cause a lot of pain so regular checks and routine care is essential to ensure your donkey remains happy and healthy.

Donkeys have two sets of teeth in their lifetime; the first set are called 'deciduous teeth', which appear above the gums in the first few weeks of life. The deciduous teeth gradually fall out and are replaced by a permanent set of adult teeth. Donkeys have a full set of permanent teeth at around five years old.

Young donkeys should have their teeth checked twice yearly until they have developed their full adult teeth. Adult donkeys need to have their



teeth checked annually by a suitably qualified equine dental technician (EDT), with any additional checks on their expert advice.

During your donkey's dental check, the EDT will use a metal gag to hold open their mouth until they are able to clearly see inside the donkey's mouth. They will then use their hand to feel for any sharpness or irregularity. If any sharp edges are noted, the EDT will rasp (file) these down to make them smooth again. If the EDT has any concerns about the donkey's teeth, they will raise these with you.

Some common conditions seen in donkeys include (but are not limited to):

- Sharp points on the teeth – referred to as 'overgrowths'.
- Diastema – gaps between the teeth where food can become trapped.
- Periodontal (gum) disease.
- Missing teeth.
- Fractured/broken teeth.

If your donkey becomes reluctant to eat, it could be a sign that they are experiencing some dental issues so it is vital that you learn to recognise the signs of potential dental issues which can include:

- Behavioural changes.
- Slow or intermittent eating, or sometimes complete refusal to eat.
- Weight loss.
- Quidding (difficulty chewing and dropping chewed balls of food).
- Difficulty grazing.
- Excess production of saliva (drooling).
- Discharge from the nose.
- Colic.

To rehome an equine from Bransby Horses, your chosen EDT must be a registered professional with either the British Association of Equine Dental Technicians (BAEDT) or the World Wide Association of Equine Dentistry (WWAED). You can find an appropriately registered professional by visiting the BAEDT or WWAED's websites:

baedt.com
wwaed.org.uk

Colic and Stomach Care

Colic is a term used to describe a symptom of abdominal (belly) pain, which in donkeys is usually caused by problems in the gastrointestinal tract, though it can also be caused by other organs such as kidneys, ovaries or bladder.

There are many different types of colic, which range from mild to severe (life-threatening) in nature. Learning to spot the warning signs that your donkey may be experiencing colic could be vital in saving their life.

The most commonly seen types of colic are:

- Impaction colic – a blockage of the intestine caused by partially digested food, foreign bodies (e.g. plastic bags) or parasites such as worms.
- Spasmodic colic – muscle spasms in the wall of the intestine.
- Gassy colic – a build-up of gas.
- Torsion colic, also referred to as twisted gut – a part of the intestine becoming twisted.
- Displacement – one section of the bowel moves to an abnormal location.
- Painful conditions such as stomach ulcers, tumours or pancreatitis.

Any variation of colic can become fatal if it is not caught in time, and prevention is always better than the cure. Get to know what is normal for your donkeys so that you are better able to spot any subtle signs of a change in behaviour that could indicate colic.

Due to being very stoic in nature, donkeys typically show much less dramatic signs of colic than can be seen in horses. This does not mean that the donkey is not in as much pain as horses. Typical signs of colic can include:

- Dullness.
- Laying down.
- Lack of appetite or refusing to eat.
- Weight shifting, usually on the hind legs.
- Repeated rolling and pawing at the ground.
- Rapid breathing rate.

- Sweating.
- Deep red or pale gums.
- Dry or tacky gums.
- A reduced amount or a complete cease of droppings.
- Moving away from companions and self-isolating.

If you suspect your donkey is experiencing colic, call your vet immediately and follow their advice.

Methods to reduce the likelihood of colic presenting include not making any sudden changes to their diets, feeding good quality forage avoiding any that is mouldy, feed little and often and restrict their access to fresh spring grass. It is also prudent to ensure they do not have access to eat anything they shouldn't, such as poisonous plants, non-food items such as plastic bags and rope, and avoid grazing on sandy pasture where possible.

Ulcers

The digestive tract of a donkey is like a finely tuned machine that works exceptionally well under the right circumstances which is why they are such 'good doers'. Of course, the flip side to this is that if something is not quite right in their diet, a host of issues can arise.

Gastric ulcers and lesions located on the lining of the stomach can cause pain, loss of appetite and colic. They are caused when the acidic fluid which resides in the lower part of the stomach, splashes on to the upper part of the stomach due to a lack of foodstuff being present. The upper part is not protected in the same way that the lower is and as a result, these splashes can erode the unprotected part, causing pain.

Donkeys are trickle feeders naturally, which avoids the stomach becoming overly full or completely empty. As such, we know that feeding little and often to our donkeys will help optimise their gut health.

Donkeys produce stomach acid continuously, the main buffer for which is saliva, and when donkeys eat forage more saliva is produced than when they eat cereal grain-based feeds.

Hyperlipaemia

Hyperlipaemia is a potentially life-threatening condition caused by having too much fat in the blood that is not uncommon in donkeys. Donkeys, as we know, are designed to live in harsh environments with sparse vegetation, with the necessity to walk for up to 16 hours a day in search of food. When living on the lush and plentiful grazing that we have in the UK, the result is a gain in excess fat reserves especially when coupled with limited exercise. Should your donkey stop eating for any reason while living with this excess fat reserve, the risk of hyperlipaemia arises.

When a donkey stops eating, it goes into a state known as “negative energy balance”. This means that the donkey is using more energy than it is consuming. The donkey’s essential organs still require a food supply, so the body tries to use energy that is stored as fat deposits, resulting in fatty acids being circulated to the liver for it to be converted into glucose for the body to use as fuel.

This system is controlled by hormonal events which should theoretically, control and shut down the amount of fat released from the fat stores as the liver produces glucose. Donkeys however, are unable to efficiently turn off this fat release and as a result, the blood very quickly fills up with excess fat in circulation.

This circulating fat can be measured in blood samples by your vet and can cause both the liver and kidneys to start degenerating until they fail and eventually, as a result, all the body organs fail. Sadly the result of this is irreversible, leading to the donkey’s death.

Risk Factors

A number of risk factors have been identified as posing a higher risk of a donkey developing hyperlipaemia, including:

- Obesity – while a donkey with higher body fat is a risk, it is important to note that even an underweight donkey is at risk of developing hyperlipaemia in the right circumstances.
- Older donkeys, as well as mares are at higher risk.
- Cushings disease.

- Laminitis.
- Stress (for example removing a bonded friend, death of a bonded friend or a significant change).
- Starvation period following surgery.

Due to being stoic in nature, donkeys may only give subtle signs that something is not quite right, so it is important to learn what is normal for your donkey so that you can spot any potential abnormalities and act accordingly.

Initially your donkey may present with a reduced appetite and bad breath (halitosis), followed by a reduction in droppings being produced. At later stages, there may be excessive build-up of fluid in the body's tissues (ventral oedema). Signs that the kidney and liver have failed include head pressing, circling and ataxia (loss of coordination).

If you are in any doubt about your donkey's behaviour or feel they are appearing dull and withdrawn, consult your vet.



Feeding

In their natural habitat, donkeys will browse throughout the day, eating highly fibrous plant material in small quantities at regular intervals. During the spring and summer our donkeys at Bransby Horses have access to restricted grazing with the addition of free access to barley straw to ensure they are getting plenty of fibre to meet their nutritional needs. They also have a donkey balancer each day, measured to their individual weights to ensure they are receiving all the vitamins and minerals they require. The amount of grass our donkeys have access to is controlled, to prevent them from becoming overweight.

During the winter months our donkeys are housed in our large airy barns with concrete run-out yards, without any access to grass. Instead, our donkeys have access to a constant supply of barley straw and are fed a donkey balancer each day, measured to their individual weights to ensure they are receiving all the vitamins and minerals they require.

Donkeys with access to grass all year round won't require much hay, even during the winter months. You should control the amount of grass and hay the donkeys eat each day to maintain ideal body condition. Grazing should always be considered as supplementary to straw, which should make up most of a healthy donkey's diet.

Donkeys living in the UK are prone to significant weight gain and laminitis, needing careful management to ensure they are both happy and healthy. Donkeys should be given free access to good quality feeding straw such as barley straw and wheat straw as both are high in fibre, low in sugar and closely resemble that which a donkey would naturally eat in the wild. Access to straw allows a donkey to eat to its appetite, without consuming too many calories and gaining unnecessary weight.

Linseed straw should not be fed to donkeys as the seed is poisonous to them and it is difficult to ensure that no seed is present within the straw. Donkeys who are on a forage only diet may not obtain all the required vitamins and minerals from the straw, grass and hay in their diets. Therefore, it is recommended that in addition to the standard food

you supply, donkeys will benefit from the addition of a vitamin and mineral supplement in the form of a balancer or an un-molassed equine mineralised block, designed to supplement their diet all year round to prevent any deficiencies.

Should treats be given, they should be as low in sugar as possible and no more than a handful of chopped apples, carrots or high fibre nuts. Carrots, apples, bananas, pears, turnips and swedes are all safe and usually very popular with donkeys. Avoid offering your donkey sugar-based licks; whilst these are often marketed as 'boredom breakers', they are not suitable for donkeys due to their high sugar content.



Worming

Donkeys usually acquire worms (internal parasites) by grazing contaminated pasture. While it is natural for equines to have worms – and very few will ever be completely worm free – the correct and responsible use of wormers alongside good field management will help keep the number of worms at a manageable level. We recommend making use of Faecal Worm Egg Counts (F FEC) via a reputable company so that you are only worming when necessary to help with the ever-growing prevalence of wormer resistance.

A F FEC records the number and type of worm eggs seen in a sample of your donkey's droppings. A positive result indicates the presence of adult (egg-laying) worms. The count indicates whether your donkey is shedding a low or high number of eggs in its droppings, and these numbers dictate whether it may be necessary to worm your equine. Not all equines grazing the same pasture will have the same egg count, so gathering samples from each equine separately is recommended to ensure accuracy of results.

Ideally you should be testing a sample of your donkey's dropping four times per year. Before administering a wormer, you will need to know your donkey's weight to ensure a correct and effective dose is given.



Donkeys usually acquire worms by grazing

Rugs

While horses have a natural grease to their coat which provides natural waterproofing, donkeys have not evolved to have such a trait, though their coats will naturally thicken over winter to provide extra warmth and protection. Your donkeys should have access to a suitable shelter, out of prevailing winds with fresh bedding as well as hard standing to keep them off the wet and muddy fields.

An older donkey may struggle to maintain their body heat and would benefit from wearing a special rug designed for donkeys. Pony rugs are not suitable for donkeys due to the difference in body shape and build.

Rain scald and mud fever are common through winter if your donkeys do not have access to shelter and hard standing. Both of these conditions happen as a result of the donkey's skin and/or hair becoming wet for a long period of time. Rain scald affects the shoulders, back and rump, while mud fever affects the lower limbs. They both cause crusting of the skin and matting of your donkey's coat. If you suspect your donkey may have either of these conditions, contact your vet for advice.



Hoof Care

Donkey's hooves have adapted to survive in a dry environment, with dry and stoney ground. As a result, donkeys' hooves can often suffer if they are living on lush, wet pasture such as in the UK.

Donkeys need their hooves trimming every 6-8 weeks to ensure they are well maintained and kept to a good length. It is also important to regularly pick out your donkey's feet to avoid some of the problems listed below.

- Seedy Toe – also known as 'white line disease', is when the white line area of the hoof becomes weak and crumbly. Often small stones and other debris can become lodged in the space under horn which can cause further issues. As such, it is important that donkeys have access to dry hard standing in wet weather to limit instances of seedy toe where possible. This could be dry concrete or a shelter. If seedy toe becomes a problem, we recommend using iodine to treat this regularly, with frequency depending on severity. Please contact us for further guidance on this.
- Thrush – an infection of the sole of the foot, particularly affecting the frog. It has a very distinctive smell and is often caused by a donkey living in wet conditions.
- Laminitis – a very painful disease often with serious consequences. There are several causes of laminitis, including too much rich food and infection. The consequence is a destruction of the support mechanism of the toe bone within the hoof. In severe cases, the toe bone can rotate or move downwards. If your donkey is unwilling to walk, lying down more than usual and has easily felt pulses in the blood vessels around the fetlock, you should contact your vet immediately as this could be a sign of laminitis. Do not make the donkey walk but place in a well-bedded stable, with easy access to food and water until the vet arrives.
- Foot abscesses – If a donkey obtains a wound which penetrates the sole of their foot or the white line, the resulting infection will present as an abscess with a build-up of puss. Wounds such as this can result in tetanus, so it is vitally important that you keep your donkey's vaccinations up to date, so they remain protected (see below).

Vaccinations

Vaccinations are an annual requirement of rehoming a donkey from Bransby Horses. They are a safe and reliable method of stimulating the immune system to help your donkeys fight off infections and diseases. We require that your donkeys receive a yearly vaccination for Equine Influenza (flu) and Tetanus.

If you miss your annual vaccination, you will need to restart the course which consists of three primary vaccinations at set intervals, prior to reverting back to annual boosters.

Equine influenza, commonly known as flu, is a respiratory disease caused by a virus. It is a different strain to the human flu, but the symptoms and transmission are similar. It is highly contagious with a high risk of disease and possibly death in unvaccinated animals. Equine flu can be spread between horses, ponies and donkeys and takes one to five days before an infected animal starts to show symptoms.

Tetanus, also referred to as lockjaw, is a disease caused by toxins (harmful substances) released by bacteria that have entered a wound or cut. Donkeys, horses and ponies are more susceptible to infection than other types of animal. It is commonly known as lockjaw because the muscles of the mouth contract and become 'locked', leaving the donkey unable to chew their food. It may take three days to three weeks from the bacteria entering a wound before an infection starts to show.

Enrichment

Enrichment opportunities for all animals is becoming a more mainstream approach to ensuring our animals are having their mental wellbeing needs met as well as their physical needs. At Bransby Horses we have worked hard to ensure that we can offer our donkeys plenty of enrichment opportunities, especially when they are in the barns throughout the winter.

Looking after the mental wellbeing of donkeys is very important as it can affect both their physical health and behaviour. A frustrated or bored donkey can show a reluctance to interact with us or may become dull and uninterested in life, which can lead to health problems.

Enrichment and mental stimulation opportunities can help to:

- Maintain normal behaviour.
- Prevent boredom behaviours.
- Ensure that their natural instinctual needs are being met.
- Increase energy expenditure (beneficial for weight loss).
- Maintain a healthy weight.
- Increase behavioural diversity by giving them more to do.
- Reduce stress and frustration.

There is more to enrichment than ensuring your donkeys are busy doing something all day, every day. It is about providing your donkeys with the opportunity to interact with the environment and its objects, making the choice to be more physically and mentally active.

Enrichment ideas utilised at Bransby Horses include:

- Going for an in-hand walk to explore.
- Scratching mats and brushes.
- Grooming.
- Stable safe mirrors.
- Hay balls filled with barley straw.
- Carrot ball.
- Natural forage such as willow branches, nettles, thistles, etc.
- Donkey-safe logs.

- Scent trails.
- Ice-cubes with flavoured water or small treats in – especially good for hot days.
- Flavoured tea sprayed on to straw.
- Treat balls.
- Hanging toys.
- Jolly balls, footballs, old wellies (which can be stuffed with straw), traffic cones, etc.

When it comes to enrichment, provided the items supplied are donkey safe, you can let your imagination go wild and come up with some fantastic ideas to help enrich the lives of your donkeys. Not only do these equines reap the benefits of being provided with enrichment, but you will also get the joy of seeing them interact with the new items; watching a donkey throw a wellington boot around is a sure way to start your day with a smile!



Donkey Care Calendar

Daily

- Twice a day, watch your donkey closely to make sure it is displaying normal behaviour and not showing signs of injury or illness.
- Twice a day, check the amount your donkey is eating and drinking. Also check the consistency and frequency of any droppings.
- Remove rugs (if applicable) and check your donkey for rubs or sores.
- Groom your donkey if their coat is dry and pick out their feet.
- Apply insect repellent according to the time of year.
- Give enough high-fibre, low-energy food (such as barley straw) to satisfy your donkey's natural appetite and maintain a healthy body condition.
- Extra feed may be required depending on your donkey's individual needs or the time of year.
- If the weather is suitable, turn your donkey out in a paddock to graze. Consider your donkey's health and stage of life before turning out to graze as it may not be appropriate to allow grazing. It is also important to check the availability of shelter before they are allowed to graze.
- Make sure clean, fresh water is easily available. Check buckets and troughs are clean and working properly.
- Muck-out stables/field shelters and paddocks.
- Give your donkey enrichment opportunities where possible.

Weekly

- Check all perimeter fencing to ensure it is well maintained and secure.
- Check for poisonous plants and remove immediately.
- Clean out stables/field shelters.

Monthly

- Arrange farrier visits every 6-8 weeks.
- Make a note of your donkey's weight/body condition score.

Yearly

- Conduct Faecal Worm Egg Counts quarterly to check for worms. The results of this will dictate whether worming is required or not.
- Arrange a visit from your qualified equine dental technician.
- Arrange for your donkey to have their annual vaccinations with your vet.

Seasonal Considerations

Spring

- Slowly and carefully introduce your donkeys to spring grazing.
- Limit their grass intake where necessary.
- Help them shed their winter coat by grooming regularly.
- Begin applying fly repellent where necessary.

Summer

- Monitor your donkey's weight and adjust grazing as necessary.
- Continue with fly repellent.
- Prevent sunburn with application of an animal safe sun lotion and/or mask.

Autumn

- Ensure hard standing areas clear of mud and debris.
- Monitor any flush of autumn grass growth and adjust grazing appropriately.
- Ensure your donkey does not have any access to seasonal poisonous plants such as sycamore and oak trees.

Winter

- Monitor your donkey's weight and increase straw.
- Monitor your donkeys water intake – often donkeys don't like drinking very cold water so you may need to add warm water to encourage drinking.



Find us at LN1 2PH
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