

## SUPPORTING THE DONKEY WITH LIVER DISEASE

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**THE DONKEY  
SANCTUARY**

Donkeys with liver disease require specialist care which is similar to the approach that would be used for a horse with similar problems.

Below are tips on feeding these animals safely whilst avoiding other problems such as colic and laminitis:

### DO'S

- Provide a high fibre and quality protein diet with a high ratio of branched chain amino acids. Generally a low fat diet is advised. However, if the donkey is struggling to maintain weight please get in contact with us.
- Provide good quality hay if the donkey's teeth allow it, if not provide short-chopped hay replacers, this should form the vast majority of the donkey's diet.
- Consider providing A, D and E vitamin supplementation, due to the reduced absorption and storage of fat-soluble vitamins. To facilitate easy administration of these please see supportive therapy below.
- Encourage owners to feed 'little and often' to ensure the liver is not overloaded if supplementary feeds are required. Breaking feed into a minimum of 4 feeds a day should be recommended. This is also a good way of closely monitoring a donkey's appetite so signs of hyperlipaemia can be detected.
- Do encourage access to grazing but instead of restricting the time restrict the grazing area so that the donkey can trickle feed instead of gorging on grass in a few hours of turnout (however keep an eye on the grass quality for laminitis). Consider night time grazing for donkeys with photodermatitis.
- Provide ad lib barley straw for donkeys with good dentition, to encourage trickle feeding.
- Encourage owners to have 'tempters' available for encouraging inappetent animals to eat – things to try include: apples / carrots, apple sauce, apple juice, mashed banana, peppermint cordial, dried mint leaf (available from most horse feed merchants), fenugreek (again from feed merchants) and molasses (small quantities only)
- If/when the donkey has regained adequate hepatic function then a gradual return to normal diet is recommended.
- If the donkey needs to gain condition, increase the amount of the diet containing the highest energy, such as hay/haylage/grass.

### DON'TS

- Don't reduce protein intake, instead provide small quantities of highly digestible good quality protein.
- Avoid feeding large quantities of high protein alfalfa chops.
- Don't feed 'senior' or 'conditioning' feeds even if the donkey is underweight, these feeds are too high in proteins, fats, starch and sugars.

### THE DONKEY SANCTUARY

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The Donkey Sanctuary was founded by Dr Elisabeth Svendsen MBE in 1969.

The Donkey Sanctuary (registered charity number 264818) and its sole corporate trustee, The Donkey Sanctuary Trustee Limited (Company number 07328588) both have their registered office at Slade House Farm, Sidmouth, EX10 0NU.

Incorporating: The Elisabeth Svendsen Trust for Children and Donkeys (EST); The International Donkey Protection Trust (IDPT).

**WORKING WORLDWIDE**

- Don't feed products high in iron and /or copper, in particular liquid supplements enriched with iron should be strictly avoided.
- Avoid the donkey becoming overweight and never put donkeys on a crash diet as this is dangerous and can lead to hyperlipaemia. Avoid all cereal-based feeds as these are not suitable for donkeys.
- Ask owners to avoid feeding excessive treats, encourage the feeding of 'safe' treats such as apples, carrots and high fibre nuts.
- Don't turn out for short periods of time as sudden gorging on grass maybe disruptive to the stability of the hindgut flora and promote ammoniogenesis.

## SUPPORTIVE THERAPY

For donkeys in good body condition and maintaining weight - Top Spec Donkey Forage Balancer fed at a rate of 100g per 100kg bodyweight per day. This provides essential supportive vitamins (particularly A,D and E which may be deficient) and minerals plus amino acids. It is low in protein, starch, sugar and energy but high in fibre so it will not promote weight gain. This is useful for donkeys that do not require a bucket feed but need hepatic support.

For donkeys of body condition score 2 or less/losing weight- Top Spec Comprehensive Balancer fed at a rate of 100g per 100kg bodyweight per day. Like the Donkey Forage Balancer it contains essential vitamins and minerals but is based on a high protein, cereal grain free, conditioning soya base which is easily digestible and may help promote weight gain.

There is no evidence for milk thistle being beneficial to donkeys however it may be worth considering under veterinary guidance. There are several equine milk thistle products on the market.

## POSSIBLE DIETS

- Good quality forage should be available at all times; depending upon the body condition of the donkey this should be composed of variable ratios of hay and straw, depending on the time of year, with restricted grazing. For those donkeys that have poor dentition and struggle with long fibres try providing short chopped hay replacers that are not alfalfa rich. Products that we have successfully fed to donkeys with chronic liver disease are:
  - Mollichaff Donkey or Mollichaff Hoofkind as a 'bucket feed' and complete hay replacer
  - Spillers High Fibre Cubes – excellent as a basic diet to promote weight gain, can be fed with chaff, should be soaked.
  - Saracens Donkey Diet – excellent as a basic diet, good for safe weight gain, should be fed soaked.
  - Speedi Beet – ok for these cases unlike more 'traditional' molassed beet products, good as an appetising 'top dressing'

For more information or if you have any questions please contact the Vet Department at the Donkey Sanctuary on [vets@thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk](mailto:vets@thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk) or 01395 578222