

Feeding the Elderly Donkey

Introduction

Generally healthy fit donkeys do very well on a basic diet of good quality feeding straw, hay/haylage and limited access to grass. Donkeys have evolved as browsers and in their natural environment would eat highly fibrous plant materials in small quantities throughout the day. Donkeys require a diet high in fibre and low in calories. Research has shown that a donkey will eat the equivalent of 1.3 – 1.8 % of their bodyweight in dry matter each day, for an average 180 kg donkey this equates to 2.3 – 3.1 kg of dry matter per day, for healthy donkeys this should be entirely made up of quality fibres such as hay and straw.

Healthy mature donkeys rarely require supplementary feeding, however as donkeys age they may require additional feeding.

Health Check

Before making any changes to your donkey's diet it is important to consult your veterinary surgeon to ensure that there are no underlying medical conditions which may be causing your donkey to drop weight or condition. It is important to ask your vet or equine dental technician to check your donkey's teeth at least once a year. Elderly donkeys may have loose or missing teeth which can make it difficult for them to chew long fibres such as straw or hay, in these cases feeding alternative fibres sources may be of benefit.

Hay Replacement

Donkeys have evolved to eat fibrous plant materials in small quantities throughout the day, this is known as trickle feeding and helps to keep the donkey's digestive system healthy and to keep the donkey occupied. When donkeys have poor teeth and are finding long fibres difficult to chew it is important to provide them with an alternative source of fibre. There are a number of hay replacement short chop products on the market for example Mollichaff Donkey, Dengie Hi Fi Lite, Hi Fi Senior and Happy Hoof.



These products may be used to replace some or all of the donkey's hay / straw ration. These short chop products are already chopped and generally very soft enabling them to be eaten by those donkeys with dental problems. Some donkeys may struggle even with these short chopped products and may need a product that can be soaked down to form a sloppy consistency. A number of high fibre cubes can be soaked to form a soup like consistency, they can be soaked for up to 30 minutes and are easy for elderly donkeys to manage (e.g. Saracens Donkey diet, Spillers High Fibre Nuts). When selecting a high fibre nut it is important to choose one that is safe for laminitics, most feed manufacturers will be happy to advise on this. Other products based on alfalfa and fibre that soak to a gruel may also be used, these products are useful for older donkeys needing extra condition as they are generally higher in calories than high fibre nuts (e.g. Fibre-Beet, Alfa-Beet).



Generally if donkeys are given products to replace or be fed alongside long fibres such as straw and hay they will cope very well however in some cases they may require other supplementary products.

Other Feeds

Donkeys that may require more calories than those that can be provided by the products listed above may need to be fed additional products. There are a number of high energy Alfalfa based chop products such as Alfa A, Alfalfa Chaff and Dr. Green that may be used to supplement part of the fibre ration. These products are usually short chopped and are suitable for older donkeys with relatively good teeth (Alfalfa can be quite hard to chew). Oil based products are also an ideal way to 'top up' the energy content of a diet for donkeys without liver disease. The nutritional value of the above products can all be increased by feeding small amounts of Soya or Vegetable Oil (up to 100ml per day). There are also high oil based products available that are excellent sources of calories, it is important to choose a cereal free product such as Equijewel and feed in small quantities.



Although it is often tempting to feed cereal based coarse mixes it is important to avoid these products. Donkeys do not require the high sugar and starch levels provided by such products and may become predisposed to problems such as gastric ulceration, laminitis and obesity.

Appetizing Additions

Although donkeys are generally good eaters and enjoy most feeds given to them some elderly donkeys may need the addition of some extra 'goodies' to tempt them. It is important to only offer treats that elderly donkeys can manage. To tempt fussy eaters carrots and apples are always invaluable however, donkeys with poor teeth may struggle with them. Grated carrots and apples are ideal, however if this is not practical mashed tinned carrots may be used or small amounts of apple sauce may be useful. Shape-Up is another laminitic-safe feed which can be used as an alternative to cereal mixes or as an appetizer.

Here at the Donkey Sanctuary we find that donkeys enjoy sugar beet added as a 'top dressing' to their normal diet. It is important to select an unmolassed sugar beet (Speedi Beet, KwikBeet) as the sugar content in traditional molassed sugar beet is too high for donkeys and again may predispose them to problems such as laminitis. Another way to tempt fussy feeders is to use peppermint cordial, small amounts of this potent liquid are ideal to add to feeds to provide a pleasant aroma and taste for donkeys.



Finally donkeys love polos and ginger biscuits, these products are great to tempt fussy feeders but care should be taken not to feed too many as they are very high in sugar and may lead to your donkey becoming overweight or suffering from health problems.

Feeding Hints and Tips

The following hints and tips are important to remember when feeding your donkey:

- Always provide fresh, clean water. It is important to ensure your donkey is drinking enough, sometimes in the winter elderly donkeys may not want to drink very cold water and it may be useful to provide luke warm water to tempt them.
- Always introduce changes to the diet gradually and observe your donkey to ensure that it is eating.
- Try to avoid feeding your donkeys more than 1 kg of food at a time, small frequent meals are best.
- Always ensure that donkeys have access to a mineral lick.
- Continually assess your donkey's body condition and make changes to their diet accordingly, if in doubt consult your vet.

The Donkey Sanctuary does not endorse any individual food or manufacturer. The information provided in this fact sheet is intended as a guide to allow donkey owners to research the most suitable product for their own situation.