



# How To Care For Your Donkey

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[www.donkey-mule.org.nz](http://www.donkey-mule.org.nz)



# How to Care For Your Donkey

This booklet is designed for those new to donkey ownership and outlines the basic needs to keep your donkeys healthy and happy.

A book list of suitable reading is on the Donkey & Mule Society of NZ website. A wide range of material can be borrowed free to members through the Society library.

Donkeys (*Equus asinus*) were introduced into New Zealand in the 1880's, the first donkey being recorded on Ponui Island in the Hauraki Gulf. They were also brought to Akaroa by the early French settlers, and donkeys were later used to breed mules for South Island high country sheep stations. Since 1970 more donkeys have been imported direct from Australia and the United Kingdom. Recently, miniature and mammoth donkeys have been imported from the United States of America. What are now known as "New Zealand donkeys" are the descendants of the Ponui Island strain; small, very sturdy and docile. "English" or "Irish" donkeys are more recent imports, still small but much finer and more active. Australian Teamster donkeys are taller and more suited to adult riding and driving. The term "Jerusalem Donkey" means nothing, but makes a lot of people very happy - any donkey may or may not have a traditional cross (or dorsal stripe), it is a colour feature and does not denote any particular breed.

**Temperament:** Donkeys are alert, intelligent and cautious animals with a generally placid temperament. It is their caution which gives them the reputation for stubbornness – if a donkey perceives danger it is likely to remain rooted to the spot while it assesses the situation. They are naturally social animals and keeping them in isolation may lead to mischievous behaviour and noisy braying. Donkeys will befriend a calf, goat or similar animal but the introduction should be gradual as the donkey may chase the stranger. However, always remember that as these animals have a shorter life span for a donkey's life companion, it is strongly recommended that a donkey has equine company and preferably another donkey. It should never be kept on its own. A solitary donkey is an unhappy lonely donkey. Donkeys should be kept away from new born lambs.

### ***Definitions:***

**Donkey, ass and burro** are all simply words from different languages for the same animal.

**Mule:** the offspring of a female horse and a male donkey.

**Hinny:** the offspring of a male horse and a female donkey

**Jack (stallion):** an entire male donkey.

**Jenny, jennet or mare:** a female donkey.

**Foal:** any baby donkey.

**Gelding:** a castrated male.

**Buying a Donkey:** A donkey's life expectancy can be up to 40 years, so be sure you are prepared to commit yourself to its care on a long-term basis. The Donkey & Mule Society of New Zealand (website: [www.donkey-mule.org.nz](http://www.donkey-mule.org.nz)) can advise on suitable types for your purpose and recommended breeders in your area. If you are inexperienced, do not buy a donkey which cannot be caught, handled and groomed - basic education is the responsibility of any reputable breeder.

**Uses for your donkey:** Donkeys make excellent family pets. They are charming, affectionate and love human company. Owning a donkey can be rewarding if they are treated with kindness and handled correctly. A quiet friendly donkey can easily be trained to give small children rides giving much enjoyment. Donkeys can make an ideal small child's first mount but always with adult supervision. Donkeys have quiet patient temperaments and are suitable to use in Outreach and Assisted Learning programmes. Many also visit Rest Homes, schools and preschools. A well trained and handled donkey is ideal for providing rides at fund raising charity events.

**Caution:** A donkey should not be ridden or have weight put on its back before it is three. A healthy adult donkey is able to carry 25% of its own body weight. A rider for a 200kg donkey should be no more than 50kg (as a guide)

**Saddles:** Small pony lightweight saddles or pony pads with a crupper are ideal. An ill-fitting saddle can cause permanent damage to your donkey's back. If you are inexperienced with fitting a saddle your local saddlery shop can help or they will give you the name of a Professional Saddle fitter.



Adult Donkeys are suitable for carrying small packs and love going for walks. Owners often find it enjoyable to head away with donkeys and packs for a picnic day trek. There is no easier way to make friends with people than walking your donkey.

Donkeys make excellent harness animals, when correctly trained. They are usually very accepting when in traffic and in strange situations. Although they lack the speed of a pony, they will trot along

all day to keep up with a driving club drive or a picnic outing.

If you are interested in driving your donkey in harness the Donkey & Mule Society of NZ (Inc.) have a very informative and helpful publication available, *A Guide to Training Your Donkey to Harness*, written by members with experience of driving donkeys.

### **What donkey is suitable for you?**

**Not a jack**, unless you intend to breed. Jacks are not suitable as safe pets no matter what size they are, some are docile and friendly, but don't be fooled as that docile friendliness can change in seconds to become uncontrollable and dangerous. The fact remains that owning a jack is for breeding purposes only. They are intended by nature to attack and defend and should be treated with caution. Responsible breeders will geld jack foals before selling.



**A gelding:** makes an excellent all-purpose donkey and will have a more level temperament than a jack. If you buy an ungelded male it is important to geld him immediately. The cost of gelding should be taken into account when setting the purchase price. Reputable breeders have their jacks gelded before selling them, because the fate of a jack is often not favourable.

**A jenny:** has an equable temperament and is suitable for all purposes. She can command a higher price as there is a possibility of foals in the future. While the charm of a donkey foal exceeds the charm of almost every other young animal, the breeder is directly responsible for ensuring that the foal is well-bred and will be sold on to a responsible new owner. Breeding a foal should be considered carefully before going ahead.

**Handling:** Always approach a donkey in a calm and relaxed way. Talk quietly to your donkey and avoid sudden movements as you put the halter on. Always tie your donkey to a secure post. Then a good brush and foot care to follow on. Talking to your donkey while handling is very calming, and they are great listeners, make this a quality enjoyable time for both of you.

**Hoof Trimming:** is recommended every six to eight weeks. Donkeys may need more frequent trimming in Spring and Autumn. Your farrier will advise you. All donkeys hooves grow and wear differently (some grow quickly in the heel and others develop a longer toe). A qualified Farrier is worth the expense of having your animal's hooves well cared for and maintained regularly. When misshapen hooves occur a farrier should be called immediately. Shoeing will not be necessary unless you take up driving and travel more than about twenty kilometres a week along the road.

**Care of the Feet/Hooves:** To handle a donkey's hoof face his rear and run your hand down its leg and lift the hoof from the fetlock. When the donkey lifts its foot, slip your hand under it for support. Do not lift the hoof too high or let it drop to the ground; put it down gently when you have finished (teach your animal a command e.g. say UP or LIFT)

The feet should be picked out regularly but definitely once a week. Remove mud and stones and clean carefully along the rim of the hoof and the frog area. Look for splits and gaps filled with hoof material that crumbles into grey powder as you scoop it out. Scrape out all the

crumbling material as this exposes the hoof to air.

This chalky, light grey substance is a sign that your donkey has Seedy Toe.



*White transparent line or sensitive laminae - site of seedy toe.*

This is the most common hoof ailment in donkeys. Seedy toe usually occurs when the donkey is standing continually on wet ground and it is the breakdown of the area between the hoof wall and the sole. If your paddock is prone to flooding and mud, then it is beneficial to provide a dry area for them to stand on at these times.

To treat the infected area of the hoof there are many suggestions as to what to use, such as, a solution of Copper Sulphate and Cider Vinegar in water, Kopatox, Foot Rot spray and copper sulphate. If the rot is on the outer wall get your farrier to cut the hoof away to open up the area. This will help to kill the infection. The hoof will soon grow again. The hoof should then be examined and treated once a week. *See reference section for Seedy Toe.*

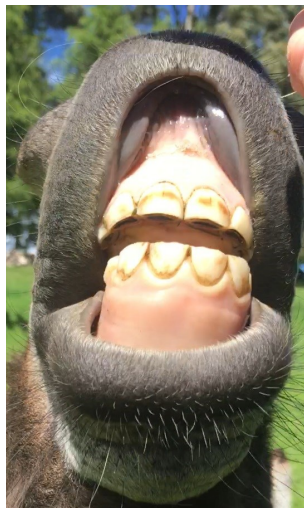
*The angle of the foot should be in line with the shoulder and pastern. This angle will vary according to the individual donkey but the aim should be to achieve a ground parallel coffin bone.*

*A well trimmed hoof.*



**Grooming:** Donkeys really enjoy being brushed. Brushing helps keep the coat healthy and removes the winter coat -. There are all sorts of brushes and grooming accessories in saddlery shops. Shop around to find what sort of brushes will suit your donkey. Regular grooming is part of good handling and bonding with your animal.

**Teeth:** As with all equines, the teeth continue to grow throughout the life of the donkey and can become very uneven and sharp causing discomfort and problems with eating. An equine dentist or competent vet used to dealing with horses can painlessly file the rough edges and remove any diseased or problem teeth. This should be done at least every two years unless there is an obvious problem that needs attention i.e weight lost.



**Health:** Donkeys suffer from the same ailments and illnesses as horses. Donkeys are stoic animals and by the time their owners realise they are sick they are usually very sick. Donkeys do not always exhibit the same symptoms as horses, the only warning signs may be standing on their own or off their food. Get to know your donkey/s well and then you will know what is normal behaviour and what is not. Do not hesitate in getting a vet if your donkey is unwell.

**Tetanus:** If you have a new donkey, ask if it has been given a tetanus vaccination, if the donkey has, you will need the record of vaccination dates. A tetanus vaccination programme is recommended. Contact your local veterinarian. (see reference section for tetanus)

### ***General Care and feeding:***

**Weather Protection:** Donkeys in New Zealand can live outdoors all year round, but should have access to a shed for protection from wind, rain and sun. A lined cover is often provided for extra winter protection, but is not essential as long as your donkey has access to good shelter. Unlike horses, donkeys do not have a waterproof coat.

**Grazing area:** You will need a suitable, well fenced, safe paddock with at least an acre of grazing; however, two or three acres are preferable. It is very desirable to be able to divide up the available grazing so that part can



be rested and allowed to recover to refresh the grass. Electric fencing is ideal for this and also to protect your trees. Donkeys may demolish unprotected trees.

Your donkey's paddock has to be free from any rubbish like old machinery, loose fencing wire, sharp objects and household rubbish, as these are safety hazards. Donkeys will try to eat anything.

**Tethering** a donkey is not recommended. It is too restrictive and the donkey has the potential to get tangled in the rope.

**Water:** Clean, fresh water needs to be available at all times, an automatic filling trough is ideal.

**Feeding:** Donkeys living in their natural, semi-arid environment would be grazing bush and grassland, thriving on eating rough or coarse grass, bark, leaves, branches, thistles and other rank weeds for survival. It is important when feeding a donkey to provide a good source of roughage.



- ◆ A high fibre diet of mould-free hay and barley straw should be provided throughout the year for roughage.
- ◆ Lucerne hay is not recommended as it is too high in protein.
- ◆ Donkeys love carrots, cut into small lengthwise sections (to avoid choking). Apples, however, should only be given occasionally.
- ◆ A mineral salt block should be provided at all times. Donkeys also enjoy rock salt.
- ◆ Do not feed grass clippings and garden pruning's (some may be poisonous), grains such as wheat, barley, oats, bread, cake or meat.
- ◆ Do not feed high energy or high grain sport horse feeds.

In New Zealand obesity and laminitis (See *reference section on laminitis*) can be a big problem, and you will almost certainly have to restrict your adult donkey's grazing when the grass is lush, especially over the Spring and Summer months. The grass has a high sugar content which is too rich for donkeys. Letting your donkey consume large quantities of rich grass can be a recipe for disaster.

### **Did you know?**

Donkeys of comparable size living on the same pasture, with the same access to grazing, may differ in body condition due to their individual metabolism. Because of this, donkeys may not require the same feed ratio.

- ◆ Mowing your paddock like a lawn for grazing will do little to help reduce donkeys weight, as the short first 3 inches of grass has the highest sugar content.
- ◆ Long grass is best, as this has a much less sugar content, and donkeys prefer longer grass.
- ◆ Night grazing on spring/early summer pasture is another option as the sugar sources are depleted later at night to early morning.
- ◆ Electric strip fencing is ideal for restricting donkey grazing.
- ◆ When not on grass a donkey **MUST** have access to meadow hay and/or barley straw at all times.
- ◆ Slow feeder hay nets filled with mould free hay/barley straw are a good way to keep your donkey munching on something throughout the day and night. Bale feeders work well for more than 3 donkeys in an area.
- ◆ If your donkeys are on rank weedy pasture then they can spend more time grazing than those on lush cattle fertilized pasture.
- ◆ The above suggested feeding is for donkeys in generally good health and condition. This is a guide only as everyone's pasture is different and seasonal and climatic conditions will affect pasture growth and nutrients. Always seek advice if unsure.

**Overweight:** Be conscious to watch for the signs of overweight - the thickening and tightening of the neck or the rolls of fat along each side of the spine or around the buttocks - as even when the donkey loses weight,

these do not usually disappear.

**Important:** When dealing with an overweight donkey make changes to the diet slowly, over a period of 6-8 weeks. Extreme dieting will put your donkey under stress and at risk of developing hyperlipaemia. (*see reference on symptoms*). **Never** leave your Donkey without food, always provide roughage especially if they are being restricted from grass.

**Elderly donkeys:** Elderly donkeys may require special dietary attention. Dental disease and/or other health problems may mean that your older donkey could have trouble chewing barley straw/hay and may require supplementary feeding, to provide an alternative fibre source. High fibre feed products are available that may assist in these cases. These feeds are best offered moist. Feed requirements for **weanlings, yearlings and pregnant Jennies** are much greater for growth and development. You may wish to speak to an equine veterinarian, or to a reputable breeder about suitable feeds available.

**Treats:** Too many treats can cause your donkey to become overweight. Always remember to spoil your donkey with **love and kindness**. Do not hand feed treats as this can develop unacceptable behaviour problems such as biting and being pushy.

**Worming:** All donkeys, like horses, carry worms and worming should be repeated, every two/three months, unless a faecal count shows that they are clear. Faecal egg count kits can be picked up from your local vet.

There are many good brands of broad spectrum equine wormers on the market, advice and purchasing can be sought from your local equine veterinarian, saddlery or stock feed store. Follow the manufacturer's directions.

We recommend to use an equine wormer only. Once a year change the wormer for different chemical base active ingredients. This will ensure there is no worm resistance build up to certain worming chemicals.

The amount of worming paste is based on the donkey's bodyweight. Under dosing may cause worm resistance to the drug. If you cannot weigh your donkey then a good estimate will do, or ask for advice. Weightbands are available from Saddlery Stores & will give owners a guide to the weight of their donkeys.

Overseas literature associates donkeys with lungworms, but this does not

seem a problem in New Zealand; keeping your donkey on a regular worming programme will be a good safe guard.

Pregnant jennies should be wormed regularly and 3-4 weeks prior to foaling. Foals can be treated for worms from 10-12 weeks of age. If you have concerns your foal is not thriving, is thin or listless, you need to seek veterinary advice.



**Note:** foals and young donkeys are more susceptible to a worm burden, and may need worming more often. So keep a close eye on young ones.

It is advisable if you have a new donkey on your property to let it settle in for a few days before worming.

#### **Never worm a donkey:**

- ◆ That is under stress,
- ◆ Has not eaten for a lengthy time,
- ◆ Or is to be immediately transported,
- ◆ If your donkey is unwell for any reason, and not worm related, leave worming until recovered.
- ◆ Some donkeys have been known to have a reaction to the wormer, possibly due to having a huge worm burden. If you suspect this seek veterinary advice.

The worm build-up is greatly increased if the dung is not collected off the paddock. It can become a simple part of the daily routine to clean up the paddock. The piled dung becomes excellent compost, known to be one of the best for the garden and your paddock will remain much healthier, especially if you keep your donkey on a small holding with little chance to spell the pasture.

## Reference:

- ◆ **Hyperlipaemia** is a life threatening metabolic condition. The main trigger for onset is rapid reduction or sudden change of feed intake. Clinical signs – loss of appetite, depression, diarrhoea, drowsiness & loss of full control of bodily movements. For more information visit:  
[https://www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk/sites/sanctuary/files/document/142-1404405754-donkey\\_health\\_and\\_welfare\\_9.pdf](https://www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk/sites/sanctuary/files/document/142-1404405754-donkey_health_and_welfare_9.pdf)
- ◆ **Colic:** Is a symptom rather than a disease and defined as abdominal pain. Usually caused by impactions or blockages of partially digested food, or worm burden. Signs if rolling, sweating or pawing the ground. These are serious signs. Also dullness, lack of appetite, refusing to eat, fast breathing, raised heart rate, colour of gums or inside eyelids-brick red colour is a poor sign. Reduction in the normal quantity of droppings. Colic is common in all equines and can be fatal. Call the vet immediately.
- ◆ **Laminitis:** also known as founder is a very painful hoof condition. It is essential for all donkey owners to recognize the early stages of laminitis. Symptoms show, reluctance to move, standing in a sawhorse stance with front legs stretched out, often lifting each leg not being able to withstand its body weight because of the pain, and often lying down. The hoof will be heated. Although over weight donkeys are most prone to developing laminitis, because of the too much rich feed, grain, or lush spring/summer grass. It is also known that donkeys that suffer prolonged stress such as post foaling issues can succumb to laminitis. **Remember preventing laminitis is far better than working though to cure this painful chronic condition.**  
<https://www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk/what-we-do/knowledge-and-advice/for-owners/laminitis-in-donkeys>
- ◆ **Seedy Toe:** Is separation of the hoof wall and sole caused by bacteria eroding and eating the white line from the outside in. Deterioration is visible when cleaning the underside of the hoof, seedy toe can be very painful and in acute cases donkeys can show the same symptoms as laminitis.  
<https://www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk/what-we-do/knowledge-and-advice/for-owners/donkey-hoof-care>.

- ◆ **Tetanus:** Is caused by infection of wounds with spores of the *Clostridium tetani* bacteria, which are found in soils contaminated with animal manure. Donkeys like all equine are highly susceptible to tetanus which is a serious disease when it occurs, causing nervous signs such as extension of the limbs, convulsions and respiratory failure and often results in death. It is very difficult to treat and most infected animals die as a result of the disease. Routine vaccination offers good protection. A tetanus vaccination programme is **recommended**, make enquiries with your local veterinarian.
- ◆ **Lice:** Most donkeys seem to develop a louse population during the winter and become quite itchy in the spring. Products for equines such as *Lice N Simple* will solve the problem. The lice do not transfer to humans but they can make your donkey so uncomfortable that he will rub himself raw. If the problem does not clear up please contact your vet.
- ◆ **Feed warnings:** Never feed donkeys food intended for other animals, e.g. cattle, pigs, poultry, can kill donkeys, or have them stored where a donkey might find its way to them. Some common plants such as Ragwort, Privet, Yew, Rhododendrons, Deadly Nightshade, Laburnum, lupin seeds and lawn clippings can be extremely harmful.
- ◆ **Permanent Identification for life.** The Donkey & Mule Society strongly recommends permanent identification of donkeys, either by microchipping or branding, these details need to be recorded with the registration in the society records. As we all know, donkeys can have a long life, over that time they can have many homes. Often names are changed, registration papers go missing and then the animal's true identity is lost. Please make sure your donkey is permanently identified for life.

## **Conclusion**

If possible become an active member of the society. There are many activities for you to participate in. Attend local donkey get togethers, field days, join in donkey walks and social functions; enter local A&P shows and our yearly North & South Island Donkey & Mule shows.

You will find the Donkey & Mule society members are a group of friendly welcoming people enjoying sharing a common interest....donkeys.

Remember the Society is available to help with any questions or concerns you may have. Contact your local area representative listed on the website under help and advice.

We acknowledge the help of the British Donkey Sanctuary in compiling these guidelines on the health and requirements of the donkey.

## **Resources to borrow**

Donkey & Mule Society of New Zealand has a library with a wide range of material listed on the website which can be borrowed free by members

[www.donkey-mule.org.nz](http://www.donkey-mule.org.nz)

## **Donkey & Mule Society publications of interest to download**

### **Donkey & Mule Society code of Ethics.**

Is a guideline, not rules, regulations or a legal document.

However, the Society encourages owners and breeders to follow them to promote and foster the highest standards of care for donkeys and mules.

[www.donkey-mule.org.nz/Ethics.pdf](http://www.donkey-mule.org.nz/Ethics.pdf)

### **Show Rules & Guidelines for Judges and Competitors**

[www.donkey-mule.org.nz/Show\\_Rules\\_Guidelines\\_Colour.pdf](http://www.donkey-mule.org.nz/Show_Rules_Guidelines_Colour.pdf)

### **Standards of Conformation & Type for Donkeys**

[www.donkey-mule.org.nz/Std\\_Con\\_Type\\_Donkeys\\_sm.pdf](http://www.donkey-mule.org.nz/Std_Con_Type_Donkeys_sm.pdf)

### **The Donkey and Mule Protection Trust**

Has excellent care information available on their website.

[www.donkey-mule-trust.org.nz](http://www.donkey-mule-trust.org.nz)

**Donkey & Mule Society of New Zealand (Inc.)**  
**[www.donkey-mule.org.nz](http://www.donkey-mule.org.nz)**