

FACTSHEET: OWNERS

FEEDING DONKEYS

Donkeys are not small horses. They need specialist feeding.

Donkeys need fewer calories to maintain their weight than ponies of the same size. They must 'trickle feed' on highly fibrous food, like they would in their natural habitat. In the UK, donkeys are particularly prone to obesity and laminitis, needing careful dietary management to avoid problems.

This factsheet gives basic advice for feeding healthy adult donkeys.

See Factsheets: *Feeding the Elderly Donkey*, *Feeding the Donkey with Endocrine Disease*, *Feeding the Donkey with Respiratory Problems*, *Feeding the Laminitic Donkey*, and *Feeding Youngsters and Broodmares* for more information about feeding donkeys with specific needs.



How should I feed my donkey?

- Give your donkey free access to good-quality feeding straw (barley and wheat are best), with small quantities of hay, haylage, or grazing.
- Feed a vitamin and mineral supplement or a low energy forage balancer that does not promote weight gain.
- Make sure your donkey always has access to fresh clean water.
- Have your donkey's teeth checked at least once a year by a qualified equine dental technician or vet. If your donkey has dental problems, replace long fibres (such as straw, haylage, and hay) with a short-chop diet instead. See *Factsheet: Feeding the Donkey with Dental Disease* for more information.
- Body condition score your donkey regularly. Donkeys are prone to weight gain, which can predispose them to laminitis and hyperlipaemia. See *Factsheets: Body Condition Score Chart*, *How to Carry Out Body Condition Scoring*, *Laminitis in Donkeys*, and *Hyperlipaemia in Donkeys* for more information.
- Feed according to your donkey's body condition. Restrict intake of energy-rich feeds (such as hay, haylage, or grass) if your donkey is overweight. Make sure a source of fibre (such as straw) is always available to satisfy your donkey's need to trickle feed. See *Factsheet: Feeding the Overweight Donkey* for more information.
- Carefully restrict your donkey's grazing by limiting the amount of grass that is available.
- Make sure any supplementary feeds are high in fibre, low in calories, and suitable for laminitics.



Always introduce changes to your donkey's diet gradually. Check to make sure they are eating properly.

What should I avoid?

Avoid cereal grain-based feeds. You can maintain your donkey, and even encourage weight gain, on fibre-based products. See *Factsheet: Feeding and Managing the Underweight Donkey* for more information.

- Do not feed sugary treats. Use natural treats for training or handling purposes. Feed no more than a handful of chopped apples, carrots, or high-fibre nuts each day. See *Factsheet: Safe Treats and Tempters*.
- Do not feed unnecessary supplements. Unless your vet tells you otherwise, your donkey should only need a vitamin and mineral supplement or forage balancer. Additional supplements may put your donkey off their feed, or cause health problems due to an overdose of nutrients.
- Do not provide sugar-based licks. These are often marketed as 'boredom breakers' but are not suitable for donkeys due to their high sugar content.
- Do not give straw with retained grain to your donkey, either as feed or bedding.
- Do not restrict your donkey's total food intake to encourage weight loss. If your donkey needs to lose weight, feed low-calorie products in combination with exercise. Extreme dieting can put donkeys at risk of developing hyperlipaemia, a potentially fatal condition.

What should I feed my donkey?

- An average-sized (175 kg) healthy, adult donkey needs 2-3 kg of fibrous food each day to satisfy their appetite.
- If your donkey has no dental problems, feed a diet of 75% straw in summer and 50% straw in winter. Make up the remainder of their diet with hay or haylage, or restricted grazing.
- Provide an equine-specific source of vitamins and minerals by means of an unmolassed lick block, a feed supplement or a low calorie forage balancer.
- Supplementary feeds suitable for donkeys with specific needs (such as underweight donkeys or those with dental problems) include:
 - soaked high-fibre pellets
 - short-chop fibre products (chaff)
 - unmolassed sugar beet – excellent as a 'top dressing' for soaked fibre pellets.
- Avoid feeding your donkey more than 500g of supplementary food at a time. Small frequent meals are best.
- Provide free access to salt. Lick blocks are ideal as donkeys can help themselves as and when needed.
- Provide safe logs and branches to help satisfy your donkey's natural browsing behaviour. See *Factsheet: Safe Trees and Shrubs* for advice on which species are suitable.



Continually assess your donkey's body condition and make changes to their diet based on this. If in doubt, speak to your vet or email nutrition@thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk.

You can also fill in our online enquiry form at <https://bray.news/feed>.