

What Should You Feed Your Donkeys?

In their natural habitat donkeys will browse, eating highly fibrous plant material in small quantities throughout the day.

During the spring and summer the donkeys at the Donkey Sanctuary are out grazing in the fields. In addition to the grass they always have access to barley straw to ensure they are getting plenty of fibre. The amount of grass is controlled; either by strip grazing using electric fencing or by limiting the amount of time they have access to the grass, to prevent them getting too fat.

During the winter months they are housed in large airy barns with concrete run out yards, without access to grass. Instead they have free access to barley straw and are fed a controlled amount of hay or haylage according to body condition. Old or sick donkeys may be fed additional high fibre feeds and supplements in special circumstances.

If your donkeys have access to grass all year round then very little hay will be required, even during the winter months. Control the amount of grass and hay they have each day to maintain good body condition. You may want to provide barley straw as part of the winter diet.

Hay

If you anticipate feeding hay during the winter months then you need to take into account the type of hay you are buying and the time of year that it was cut.

- Meadow Hay is a natural mix of grasses made from grass grown on old pasture and is good for feeding to donkeys.
- Seed Hay is also good for donkeys. It is a planted crop of specific grasses, such as Rye or Timothy; which the farmer makes from the stems remaining after the grain has been taken.
- Hay produced from cow pasture will usually have higher protein and energy levels and may be less suitable if fed on its own. However it could be fed mixed with a higher ratio of straw.
- Remember that late cut hay will have lower energy values, so, careful assessment of the quality of the hay must be made. Look out for Ragwort in hay as this is VERY poisonous to donkeys.

Weather conditions control the cutting season (late May to mid June) If the hay is cut later in the year a lot of the goodness will have gone out of the grass and some of the grass will have gone to seed. This type of hay is much lower in energy value than early cut hay and for that reason it is fine for feeding to donkeys. If the weather in May is good the farmers might make hay in the first week of June and get a second cut at the end of July. This 'second cut' hay is usually lower in energy value and again is fine for donkeys.

Freshly cut hay should be stored in a dry barn for at least two months before feeding. Do not suddenly introduce freshly cut hay as it could cause colic and laminitis. Reduce the risk by mixing the new hay with the previous year's hay, or mix it with straw over a few days so there is a gradual change over. If hay is in short supply in your area (or if it is very expensive) then you could look at the following alternatives.

Straw

Good quality barley straw can have similar feed values to poor quality meadow hay. It is high in fibre, if fed in controlled amounts it is useful for dieting plumper donkeys. Alternatively oat straw can be fed; this usually has a slightly higher nutritional value than barley straw. Wheat straw is very fibrous and has lower energy values. Linseed straw is best avoided since the seed is poisonous unless it has been boiled, and it is very difficult to ensure that no seed is present in the straw. If straw is in short supply then priority must be given to feeding and an alternative bedding to be used.

Haylage

Haylage is semi-wilted grass that has been allowed to dry to only 55-65% dry matter (as compared to 85% in hay). The grass is baled, compressed and sealed in tough plastic and the resultant forage is virtually dust-free, highly palatable and nutritious. Once the plastic wrapping is broken (deliberately or accidentally) fungal spores start to grow. The haylage must be used within 3-4 days (less in warm weather) or discarded. If there are any signs of mould or yeast growth on a bale once opened it should be discarded, as should any uneaten haylage.

Silage

Silage is not suitable for feeding to donkeys as the moisture level is usually too high, with a low pH, a low fibre and high protein level.

High Fibre Cubes and Mixes

There are many brands on the market. Some products are suitable for replacing hay in a donkeys diet. Select a brand containing a probiotic or soya oil with high fibre, low sugar content if you need more than grass, hay and straw to build up the weight of an old or thin donkey. Care must be taken that the donkey does not eat the cubes or mix too quickly, which may cause colic, so add water and mix with a small quantity of low sugar chaff. Products marketed for equines prone to laminitis are a good choice as they are usually high fibre and low sugar.

Chaff and Freeze Dried Grass

There are many types of chaff on the market. These contain variable amounts of chopped rye, timothy or alfalfa grasses & oat straw. Some have added oil, molasses, minerals, herbs or hoof growth supplements whilst others are high fibre and molasses free. The chaff or freeze dried grass products marketed for equines prone to laminitis are useful for donkeys who have difficulty eating grass, hay and straw due to poor dentition.

Dried Sugar Beet Pulp

Sugar beet is a useful source of succulent nutritious, digestible fibre when added to the feed, although it cannot replace hay or one of its alternatives. Sugar beet can be used in small amounts to tempt a sick donkey to eat. We recommend unmolassed sugar beet to avoid laminitis. Dried sugar beet pulp is available in shredded or cubed form and **MUST** be thoroughly soaked before feeding and used within 24 hours once wet. Soaking times vary so refer to the instructions for each type.

Succulents

Carrots, sliced lengthways to avoid choking, turnips and cabbage leaves provide a change of diet, encourage appetite and are a worthwhile addition to the normal ration in winter and early spring when fresh grass is not available. Do not feed root crops that have been subjected to frost, or green potatoes.

Minerals and Vitamins

Donkeys obtain many vitamins and minerals from the straw, grass and hay in their diets. However, we recommend that they have free access to an equine mineralized block, which contains various minerals including salt, to supplement their diet. Blocks designed for other livestock may be dangerous for donkeys as some contain inappropriate mineral levels.

Water

Water is perhaps the most essential of all nutrients since without it life cannot continue for longer than a few days (or less in adverse conditions). Clean, fresh water should be freely available at all times. Do remember to check water supplies in cold weather.

General Warning

- All equines are sensitive to toxins that can be found in spoiled feeds.
- All feed stuffs should be of high quality.
- All feed stuffs should be free from mould.
- All changes to diet should be made gradually.
- Donkeys prefer to browse for their bulk and fibre throughout the day.
- Donkeys prefer to eat little and often.
- Donkeys do not need high levels of sugar in their diets.
- Do not over feed your donkey - check the body condition of your donkey regularly.
- If in any doubt about the energy value or the quality of any feed, it is advisable to seek expert advice.
- Always provide a mineral lick and permanent access to a clean water supply.
- **NEVER** feed grass clippings and ensure that your neighbours know not to too !

For more information about Nutrition and Pasture Management please refer to the Professional Handbook of the Donkey available from The Donkey Sanctuary, or you can ring the welfare advice line on 01395 578222.