

## Donkey Care

**Always make sure that your donkey has a salt block in their paddock.** They can be purchased from any farming supply store. Donkeys are "browsers", not grazers, which means they eat a huge range of plants, not just grass. Grass doesn't always give them the nutrients they need, but salt blocks help prevent them having any deficiencies. If they do have a deficiency, they will start chewing wooden fences! Donkeys love weedy, rough paddocks.

**Worming:** Donkeys need regular worming. If nothing else, they should be wormed before winter (when animals can get rundown), and in spring, when parasitic worms are most active. Donkeys have a faster metabolism than a horse, so you double what you would give a horse - eg for a 150 kg donkey, give a 300 kg horse worm dose. You can buy tape measures that give an indication of your donkey's weight - they go around the donkey's girth area, which calculates how much they weigh. When worming, always give the full dose. Half doses only half kill the worms, and gives them resistance to drench.

**Companionship:** Donkeys are very social animals and need companionship. It is best for your donkey if this is another donkey. However, companionship from another type of animal; goat, horse, cattle and LOTS of attention from their humans is a compromise that we don't recommend, but some owners choose. This is a bit like a human, instead of other humans to hang out with, being given cats as company instead. To have no companionship at all, however, is inhumane, and will result a very miserable animal. \*\* If you have a male donkey, but don't intend to breed from him, we strongly recommend that you get him gelded. This will cost about \$200-250. Entire donkeys that can't breed can become frustrated and difficult to handle, and it is a kindness to geld them.

**Uses:** Donkeys make excellent, safe leadrein mounts for children. Donkeys need to be two years old before they're ridden. Any donkey that leads well can be used immediately, they don't need to be "backed" (trained to accept a rider on their backs) like horses are. Donkey jacks will stop bulls fighting, and some bullfarmers run donkeys for that purpose. They can be used to pull carts, and if you wish to use them for that purpose, [www.carriagedrivingnz.co.nz](http://www.carriagedrivingnz.co.nz) is an excellent society to contact. They are amazing weed-eaters, and will eat things like thistleheads, blackberry, woody nightshade, and will even munch on young gorse.

**Care:** Long feet and becoming overweight are the two major health problems that donkeys face.

**Obesity:** Often people just don't see how fat their donkey has become, and don't understand what a serious health problem it is. Basically, if you see any fat rolls over your donkey's neck or rump they need to have their food intake reduced. The easiest ways of doing this is either by strip grazing, or if you have one, shutting them in a pen at night and letting her out during the day. Feeding muzzles can also be bought from saddlers.

Footcare: Donkeys are from dry countries and our wet conditions can cause them to develop what is called "seedy toe", which is basically bacteria growing in their feet. This can be quite painful. Prevention is the best cure, and keeping their feet nice and short and healthy helps. Also, having a dry place to stand helps a lot. In all my donkey paddocks I have paving stones down around their troughs, and also have a paving stone pad in areas they stand often. When a worn place shows in their paddock, that is the best place to put the pad down. Trimming out the seedy toe and treating it with metalex, diluted with kerosene as per maker's instructions (the stuff that's used to tanalise timber - can be purchased at any hardware store), will fix it. Donkeys need regular foot-trimming, about every 2-3 months. A farrier will charge between \$20-40 for this. We trim our own donkey's feet. It is reasonably straightforward, and if you're interested in doing this yourself and can find someone to show you how to, go for it. We are happy to demonstrate to anyone who purchases a donkey off us the basics of foot trimming. You would need to organise to visit us on a "foot day"!

Rain scold: Donkeys can get a bit of rainscold which is basically dandruff damp and bacteria that's irritated their skin. Muddy weather can give them some thing called rainrash around their legs, which is very similar. Washing it with triocil, a medicated wash, will help fix it. I've found the quickest and easiest treatment is an ointment called pasternoint. Both products are available from your vet.

**...And Never Forget The "Just Do It" School of Donkey Handling:** Donkey's fear response is to freeze, the complete opposite of horses, who often run before they even know quite what it is they're scared of! So donkey's reputation for being stubborn is a little unfair, as a donkey who is uncooperative is probably just scared.

I handle donkey foals completely differently to how I handle horse foals. For example, when I halter train a horse I spend ages running my hand around the area that I'm going to put the halter on. Then I slip the nosepiece of the halter on and off their noses about a dozen times. Then I very slowly and gently put the top strap over and behind their ears and carefully do it up. And then I take it off and start all over again...

When I halter train a donkey foal I pen them, walk up to them, give them a pat, and then the halter on as fast as I possibly can! The trick is not to give them too much time to think about things. If I put the halter on really quickly two or three times after that, they are totally ok with it.

Likewise with loading donkeys that aren't used to being put in horsefloats, we find two strong men, and two long, strong ropes. One rope goes into the donkey's halter, up to the bar on the front of the float, gets wrapped around a few times, and the second one is used as a bum rope, and goes around their hindquarters. With us it's usually has a punny wee woman pulling on these ropes. The two strong men stand close in to the donkey, brace their shoulders against its rump, someone shouts "one, two PUSH!" and they push very hard. As the donkey moves forward, whoever is holding the rope hauls on it, and takes up the slack from the donkey coming forward. The same thing keeps on being repeated until the donkey is on. The important thing is to do it all *quickly* and not give the donkey time to think about whether or not they want to go onto the float... because if they think about

it, they'll usually decide that they don't. If we don't have two strong men, we still use three people, one on the ropes, one pushing, and a third person "walking" the legs up. This person moves around each foot, lifts it, and moves it forward, gradually, foot by foot, getting it up the ramp.

**Enjoy your donkey!** They are easy care, easy handle, safe and fun family pets. They're lovely animals to have around.

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