

A DONKEY AS A COMPANION?

Horses are not solitary animals by nature and can only be free to display their full range of natural behaviour when their lives are enriched by a companion. Many owners, constrained by grazing space or finances, struggle to keep more than one horse. A small pony often fits the bill as a faithful companion but I often wonder why more people don't consider a donkey. The amazing work the Donkey Sanctuary has done for welfare and education throughout the world has made us all aware there are many donkeys looking for a good home, for life. Donkeys are full of character and anyone who has looked into a donkey's eyes will realise they really have an inner soul that needs sustaining.

I must declare more than a general interest in the donkey at this stage. From a veterinary medicine angle they are absolutely fascinating. *Equus asinus* is a member of the horse family but their essential differences can provide much mental stimulation for the veterinary surgeon. One of the reasons for their world-wide popularity is that they are natural foragers and survive on very little food. One of the challenges for the donkey owner in the developed world is to provide enough food to keep them amused but to avoid excessive weight gain which can lead to a serious metabolic condition called hyperlipaemia (too much fat in the blood stream) and laminitis. A straw-based diet is ideal and body scoring must be done carefully as they distribute their fat stores differently from a horse.

A horse's teeth must be checked regularly and it is no different for a donkey, especially as they get older. A kilogram of hay must be chewed more than 2,000 times by a donkey to reduce the food fragments to less than 2 mm. in length for further digestion in the gut. Poor dentition can lead, as with a horse or pony, to bouts of colic or gastric ulceration. I have also seen pancreatitis in a couple of donkeys which is something I have never diagnosed in a horse.

There are many myths that say a donkey and a horse should not share the same grazing. This untruth stems from the fear that horses may contract lung-worm from donkeys. Horses are not the 'natural' host of *Dictyocaulis arnfieldii* (the equine lung-worm) and so a horse's immune system is severely provoked and even small parasitic loads will stimulate the horse to cough vigorously. The donkey is a more 'natural' host for lung-worm and therefore they can carry heavy parasite burdens (and contaminate pastures quickly) without showing outward signs such as coughing. However, performing donkey faecal worm egg counts and the appropriate use of modern wormers at the correct dosage completely negates this risk.

Skin conditions are probably seen more frequently in the donkey than the horse and I see some chronic wounds that have become super-infected by the sarcoid tumour virus which can be a nuisance. Apart from sarcoids they can be prone to skin tumours around the eye-lid margins such as squamous cell carcinomas. Early diagnosis is the key to successful treatment.

Unfortunately, I encounter too many donkeys with over-grown feet. This is a welfare issue and there really is no excuse. Neglected feet will inevitably lead to permanent damage within the tendons and other structures.

My main interest in the donkey is not associated with any of the above. It is not just medical conditions where they differ from the horse but the world of donkey anaesthesia, surgery and pharmacology presents a whole different set of circumstances. Even simple surgical procedures such as castration have to be performed to the very highest surgical standards due to a donkey's propensity to prolapse or fatally haemorrhage. Similarly, the way they respond to anaesthesia and analgesia requires very careful monitoring.

But don't let any of the above put you off owning a donkey. On balance, I would still say they are easier to keep than any horse and your life will be enriched.

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