



**Lilydale Clinic**  
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## Donkey Care

### 1. Vaccination

The main disease that donkeys must be vaccinated against is tetanus. Like all equids donkeys are particularly susceptible to the toxins that the tetanus bacteria produces. Tetanus is a disease that occurs when a wound; it can be so small you may not see it, or a hoof abscess; is contaminated with dirt or faeces. The tetanus bacteria can be found everywhere in the environment which allows easy entry to wounds. In a wound the bacteria can rapidly multiply and produce a toxin which enters the blood stream. Once in the blood stream the toxin can reach the nervous system. If affected by the toxin the animal will become stiff with stilted gait and in advance stages they are unable to eat or drink. This is also extremely painful. In equids, tetanus is fatal in 80% of cases which makes prevention much better than cure. There is a vaccination against tetanus that is 100% effective in preventing the disease. The initial course is 2 injections 4 weeks apart followed by yearly boosters.

Foals can be vaccinated from 3 months of age. Before this they are protected from their mothers, granted that the dam was up to date with her vaccinations. Pregnant Jennys should receive a booster vaccination 1 month before they are due to foal.

### 2. Worming

Donkeys are no exception to any other grazing animal in their susceptibility to gastrointestinal parasites. They share most worms with horses and can suffer the serious consequences of a worm burden: weight loss, diarrhoea, poor coat and general ill health which includes anaemia (low red blood cell count) and protein loss. Worm burden is easily diagnosed using a faecal egg count: 1 gram of faeces is examined for any presence of worm eggs by your veterinarian. Once diagnosed your vet can help you treat if needed.

The frequency of worming that is required depends on the conditions of where your donkey lives. Donkeys in high density grazing situations will need more frequent worming than donkeys grazing large pastures. Ideally worming frequency should be based on faecal egg count results to prevent build up of resistance to certain worming products.

Most oral ivermectin based products are effective provided you dose correctly for your donkeys weight. If in doubt, a slightly higher dose is preferred than underdosing. However, in miniature donkeys as well as foals it is important to not overdose as they can be susceptible to overdosing. Make sure you supplement your worming program with good pasture management; ensure to remove faeces as well as rotational grazing with cattle and sheep. It is not recommended to use rotational grazing with horses as they share many parasites with donkeys. Lastly, Lungworm can be harboured without problems in donkeys, but in horses they can cause severe disease. Therefore it is important to ensure horses and donkeys kept together are up to date with worming. Ask your vet for more details in what products to use to ensure protection against lungworm.

### 3. Dental care

It is important to keep your donkey's teeth in good condition. As veterinarians we recommend an annual dental check up, just as in horses. Donkey's teeth continue to grow and if not worn properly they can cause problems. Signs of dental disease can include weight loss, dropping food, nasal discharge, signs of colic, vitamin and mineral deficiencies and diarrhoea. Therefore it is important to get your donkey's teeth checked yearly. Please see our Equine Dental handout on our website for more information.



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#### 4. Castration

De-sexing or gelding of a male entire donkey has many benefits including inability to reproduce thus being able to be paddocked with jennies. It also helps reduce male behaviour traits which often helps in handling and working your donkey. Castration can be performed as soon as the testicles can be felt, however it is usually performed between 8 and 12 months of age. It can be performed in older Jacks. Most often castrations of Jacks are performed under general anaesthetic in the field and take 10-15minutes for the veterinarian to perform.

**There are a few specific health concerns we see in donkeys worth knowing about:**

##### 1. Equine Metabolic Syndrome and Laminitis

Donkeys, like certain breeds of horses, are designed to live in dry and arid environments such as deserts. That means that they are designed to live and thrive under conditions of minimal feed and sparse vegetation as well as walking long distances to reach food and water. In this area of the world where the donkeys only need to walk minimal distances to reach the lush abundance of feed offered to them, can result in them getting overweight but also sick. Overweight donkeys often develop a fat, crest neck and fat pads around their tail base. When this occurs the donkey can develop a metabolic disease known as 'Equine Metabolic Syndrome'. This causes insulin resistance and increased levels of blood glucose (blood sugar) in the blood stream. In equids this can lead to recurrent episodes of laminitis or founder. This disease involves inflammation of the white lining or laminae junctions of the feet, extreme foot pain and difficulty walking. In severe cases this can also cause changes in the bone of the foot and hoof wall.

Prevention of this condition is much better than cure as there are limited treatment options available. With good veterinary and farrier care most animals can be restored to normal. However, laminitis remains the second most common cause of humane euthanasia in equids.

If you notice that your donkey is getting fat or if you notice episodes of foot pain ensure you contact your veterinarian.

Once the pain is resolved it is important to increase your donkeys exercise and reduce the food intake. Good ways to increase exercise is keeping them in a larger paddock with less food, where they have to walk longer distances to the food, riding, ground work or pulling a cart. Weight reduction by exercise will reduce the sugars in the blood thus reduce risk of laminitis.

##### 2. Colic

There are many different causes of colic, which is a broad term to describe abdominal pain. Spasmodic colic, impaction, twisted bowel or gut rupture are a few causes of 'colic'. As an owner it is important to recognise the signs of colic. If you notice these signs DO NOT WAIT to call a veterinarian. Most cases are mild and easily treated with medications, and it is important to remember that your animal is in pain and a vet can help ease that pain. The main signs to look out for are:

- Lying down
- Rolling
- Kicking towards the belly



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- Belly or flank watching
- Pawing on the ground
- Not wanting to eat

If you see these signs in your donkey, call a vet, and start walking your donkey and try to prevent it (safely) from lying down and rolling. Don't give any medications as they may interfere with other preferable medications given by your vet, or preventing more effective medications to be given.

Donkeys are very stoic animals and will not show pain or illness as soon as most horses would. Therefore, most signs of illness may indicate that there is something serious going on for your donkey to show signs of pain.

### **3. Hyperlipaemia and Hyperlipidaemia**

This is a condition that translated to 'fatty blood'. It is serious and life threatening. Donkeys, miniature horses and ponies are very susceptible to this condition. Any donkey that is sick, stressed or affected by any circumstances (diseases, transport, pregnancy, parasites) or off their food is considered to be at risk of this condition. It can be a primary problem, but often hyperlipaemia/hyperlipidaemia is triggered by something else. When donkeys go off their feed their bodies quickly metabolises fat storages to use as energy. Unfortunately, sometimes this fat cannot be cleared from the blood quick enough leading to increased triglycerides in the blood. Overweight animals are more susceptible to this as they have more fat stores to be released into the blood and taking longer to clear from the blood again. This fat in the blood causes the blood flow to vital organs to slow down, fat build up in the liver and oedema seen as swollen legs, swollen chest and under belly. A liver that has a large fat build up can be prone to rupture but it also reduced the functions of the liver. In severe cases donkeys can show neurological signs and seizure as the brain isn't receiving enough oxygenated blood. This is a disease that can quickly become life threatening. If your donkey is sick and off their food, call a vet as soon as possible. A blood test can help diagnose this syndrome and in many cases you can see the fat in the blood in the collection tube.

In any donkey going through periods of illness, stress, pregnancy etc it is important to do anything possible to keep them eating. Other important preventative measures includes worming, dental care and vaccinations to avoid the initial triggers that may cause your donkey to go off their food.

**If you have any questions in regards to donkey health or would like one of our vets to come examine your donkey, vaccinate or perform dentals please give our hospital a call: (03) 9739 5244.**