

Nursing care of geriatric donkeys

Many donkeys are now kept as pets rather than working animals. This means they often live longer, with many now reaching 20-years-old and being classed as geriatric. These donkeys often require specialist treatment and management, as they are prone to certain conditions such as dental disease and arthritis. The owner should be fully involved with treatment plans and supported through any environmental changes. When the time comes, the quality of life of the geriatric donkey should be assessed carefully, and the owner should be guided through the resulting decisions with support and dignity for their much-loved companion.

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Marie Rippingale BSc (Hons) REVN G-SQP DipHE CVN Dip AVN (Equine) IQA, Tutor in equine veterinary nursing, Bottle Green Training, 1A Offices, Station Road, Melbourne, Derby, DE73 8HJ. mariediddles@gmail.com

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The definition of a 'geriatric' donkey is one that is over 20 years old (Evans and Crane, 2018). Many donkeys living as companions, rather than as feral or working individuals, will live far beyond this age and have a long, fulfilling life. However, geriatric donkeys require special care and close monitoring. Vets and registered veterinary nurses (RVNs) working in equine practice should be aware of the specific conditions associated with geriatric donkeys and the individualised care they require.

Companionship

Donkeys form strong lifelong bonds with their companions. For this reason, donkeys should always be admitted to the practice with their companion. Separating donkey companions can lead to stress, anorexia, hyperlipaemia and even death. When working with geriatric donkeys, it is essential to know how to manage a situation in which companions are separated by death. If one of the donkey companions dies or is euthanased, it is essential that the surviving donkey(s) are allowed to remain with the body of their friend until they have lost interest (The Donkey Sanctuary, 2016). The bereaved companion should be closely monitored for several weeks afterwards, as bereavement stress can manifest itself up to 3 weeks after the death. If it is appropriate for all the animals involved, another quiet donkey could be introduced over a fence to the pair before euthanasia. This will mean that the survivor is left with a companion within its visual field (Evans and Crane, 2018). After the euthanasia, a structured introduction can then be made between this pair. This process should be managed carefully. Vets and RVNs can make a big difference to the quality of life of the remaining companion and the owner, by offering advice and support throughout this process.

Assessment of weight

It is important to know how to assess the weight of a geriatric donkey. The most accurate way to do this would be to use an electronic

weighbridge. However, many geriatric donkeys will be assessed 'out on the road' as opposed to at an equine practice. A donkey-specific weigh tape can be used to estimate the weight of a donkey during the visit. It is then useful to teach the owner how to use the weigh tape and get them to purchase one. The donkey's weight can then be monitored over time. One concern with geriatric donkeys is that weight loss can be disguised under a thick coat (Evans and Crane, 2018). Obesity is another concern and this should also be monitored as it can lead to conditions such as laminitis. Another way to monitor the weight of a donkey is to condition score them and owners can be taught how to do this on a monthly basis. Body condition scoring is a hands-on process for feeling the amount of muscle and fat that is covering the donkey's body. Five specific areas are assessed:

- Neck and crest
- Shoulders and withers
- Back and ribs
- Loins
- The dock and tail areas (The Donkey Sanctuary, 2016).

Measurements should be recorded to enable weight to be monitored over time. Interventions can then be implemented with support and advice from the vet or RVN.

Pain scoring

The donkey is a stoic animal and rarely displays readily visible signs of pain, distress or fear. This makes inspection difficult and illness, pain and even severe conditions may be missed (Evans and Crane, 2018). Therefore it is essential that both RVNs and vets working with geriatric donkeys can accurately assess pain and treat it accordingly. Van Dierendonck et al (2020) created a composite pain scale and a facial expression pain scale specifically for donkeys. These scales have been proven to be valid and clinically applicable and should be taken into consideration when assessing pain in donkeys, as they differ slightly from the pain scales commonly used for horses. It is also important

for RVNs and vets to teach the owners of geriatric donkeys to assess pain effectively. The dull or unusually quiet donkey should be treated as a veterinary emergency (Evans and Crane, 2018). As owners are the first line of defence when assessing the normal behaviour of their donkeys, they should be given help and support to do this accurately.

Dental disease

Dental disease, with or without associated sinus disease, occurs frequently in donkeys. Common abnormalities seen in older donkeys include periodontal disease, diastemata, malocclusions, dental overgrowths resulting in both hard and soft tissue pathology, such as penetration of opposing bony structures and tooth loss (Evans and Crane, 2018). It is widely recognised that dental pain is one of the most severe pain sources in horses and ponies, and this is no different for the donkey (Evans and Crane, 2018). As donkeys are commonly kept as companions, the signs of dental disease can be overlooked. It is essential that owners are taught to look out for signs of dental disease in their geriatric donkeys. Signs of dental disease include:

- Difficulty chewing
- Dropping food out of the mouth (quidding)
- Excessive salivation
- Behavioural changes
- Difficulty prehending grass
- Halitosis
- Food packing (retention of partly chewed food in cheek pouches)
- Whole grains or long fibre in the faeces
- Nasal discharge
- Colic episodes
- Inability or lack of desire to eat
- Weight loss (The Donkey Sanctuary, 2016).

Regular dental care should be encouraged by vets and RVNs. Generally, donkeys should have a dental examination by a vet or equine dental technician twice a year. However, geriatric donkeys may require more frequent dental examinations. If treatment is inadequate or inappropriate, it takes fewer than five years for dental health to decline to concerning levels (The Donkey Sanctuary, 2016)

Feeding

Healthy geriatric donkeys mostly require a basic diet of good quality barley straw (Figure 1), limited access to grass and a vitamin and mineral supplement. Donkeys require a diet high in fibre and low in calories. Donkeys will eat the equivalent of 1.3–1.8% of their bodyweight in dry matter each day. For an average 180 kg donkey, this equates to 2.3–3.1 kg of dry matter per day (The Donkey Sanctuary, 2014). If extra feed is required, high energy Alfalfa-based chaff products can be used to supplement part of the fibre ration. These products are usually short chopped and are only suitable for older donkeys with good liver function and good teeth. Vegetable oil-based products can also be used to increase the energy content of the diet (The Donkey Sanctuary, 2014). It is important to avoid feeding cereal-based coarse mixes to geriatric donkeys, as they do not require the high sugar and starch levels provided by such feeds. Problems such as gastric ulceration, laminitis and obesity can occur as a result of overfeeding (The Donkey Sanctuary, 2014).

Geriatric donkeys with dental disease may require a specific diet, usually in the form of a short chop forage. High-fibre, low-calorie



Figure 1. Healthy geriatric donkeys mostly require a basic diet of good quality barley straw.

short chop chaff products can be fed ad libitum as part of a 'hay replacer diet'. This helps to satisfy the behavioural needs of the donkey as a trickle feeder to chew for long periods of time (Evans and Crane, 2018). High fibre cubes can also be fed to donkeys with dental problems. They can be soaked for up to 30 minutes to make them easier for geriatric donkeys to chew (The Donkey Sanctuary, 2014). Non-molassed sugar beet can be added into a hay replacer diet if the donkey needs to gain weight. Carrots, bananas and apples can be used to tempt an inappetent donkey. However, donkeys with poor teeth may struggle with these. In this case, carrots and apples can be grated and added to the feed. If this is not practical, mashed or tinned carrots or small amounts of apple sauce could be used (The Donkey Sanctuary, 2014).

When caring for geriatric donkeys in practice, it is always a good idea to ask to owner to bring in feed from home. This will ensure that the diet is kept the same and avoid any unnecessary changes to the diet, which could lead to colic. If the donkey's diet needs to be changed long-term following veterinary treatment, the vet or RVN should fully involve the owner in the formulation of a new diet, as this will encourage a higher level of compliance.

Arthritis

Arthritis is common in geriatric donkeys, frequently affecting the upper limb joints, primarily the shoulders and hips. Clinical signs include:



Figure 2. Arthritic donkeys should be provided with a deep, clean bed and rubber mats to facilitate recumbency and rest.

- Shortened stride length
- Difficulty getting up or reluctance to lie down
- Resentment when having limbs lifted for routine procedures such as foot cleaning or farriery (Evans and Crane, 2018).

It is important to speak to the owner to find out how the donkey is adapting to life with arthritis. Medical treatment of the condition is similar to that of the horse and pony. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs are commonly used. Although, donkeys generally metabolise drugs faster than horses, so the frequency of dosing is often increased to twice daily (Evans and Crane, 2018). Vets and RVNs who are caring for geriatric donkeys with arthritis at the practice can help to increase their comfort in a number of ways:

- Provide a deep, clean bed and rubber mats to facilitate recumbency and rest (Figure 2).
- Keep the donkey warm with rugs or a heat lamp.
- Feed and water buckets can be raised off the floor to make eating and drinking easier.
- Physiotherapy or controlled exercise may help to reduce stiffness if the patient is on prolonged box rest. Nursing care of arthritic geriatric donkeys is discussed in more detail in the next instalment of this series.

Quality of life assessment

It is important that vets and RVNs in equine practice can support the owners of geriatric donkeys to help them to maintain the best quality of life for their equine companion. If euthanasia is not immediately indicated or accepted by the owner, it is a valuable exercise to monitor changes or progressive decline by examining and recording specified parameters (Evan and Crane, 2018). The RVN or

KEY POINTS

- The definition of a 'geriatric' donkey is one that is over 20 years of age.
- Geriatric donkeys require special care and close monitoring.
- The owner should be fully involved with any treatment plans and be supported through any environmental changes required.
- Quality of life assessment is important, especially in geriatric donkeys. Owners should be involved in this process to ensure the health and welfare of the donkey.
- Even if the decision is made to euthanise the donkey, this should be carried out with support and dignity.

vet can give the owner a monitoring sheet to record the health and welfare of their donkey. A guide to monitoring your donkey's quality of life has been produced by The Donkey Sanctuary and is free to download (<https://www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk/what-we-do/knowledge-and-advice/for-owners/monitoring-your-donkeys-quality-of-life>). The owner should complete the sheet on a daily or weekly basis and discuss the findings with the vet or RVN. The parameters included in the sheet give a good indication of the health and welfare of the donkey, enabling the owner to see any progress or decline. If the quality of life of the donkey is considered to be poor and treatment options are limited by severity of disease or financial considerations, then euthanasia is likely to be the best outcome for the donkey's welfare. Euthanasia should not be considered a failure of care, but as the last good thing that can be done for the donkey (Evan and Crane, 2018). It is important that the vet and RVN support the client through the process of euthanasia. This can involve helping the client to manage the donkey's companion or find a new companion, and offering details of bereavement services.

Conclusion

Geriatric donkeys require special care and monitoring throughout their old age, as they may be more prone to conditions such as dental disease and arthritis. They may require specific medication, monitoring and environmental adjustments to ensure that they have a good quality of life. Vets and RVNs in equine practice should be aware of the specialist care required by these patients, and endeavour to support their owners through any changes to their care. Quality of life assessment is important, especially in geriatric donkeys. Owners should be involved in this process to ensure the health and welfare of the donkey. If the decision is made to euthanise the donkey, this should be carried out with support and dignity. **EQ**

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