

Did You Know?

Helpful Tips for Successful Donkey and Mule Management
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Donkeys and mules have made a surprising come back since the turn of the century. Originally, these animals were used as beast of burdens, but today they are growing in popularity as companion animals, trail mounts, and even for showing purposes. Due to popular movies such as *Shrek* and the use of the mule for tourists in the Grand Canyon, there is a growing increase in donkey and mule owners across the U.S.

These unique animals have proven to be popular in many cultures due to their remarkable ability to adapt to harsh and extreme conditions. Donkeys and mules adapt to extreme environmental conditions and have less demanding feeding requirements than horses, (Fedorski, 2004) but why they are able to adapt so well and thrive in such conditions is not fully understood (NRC, 2007). The donkey and mule have provided much interest in terms of scientific curiosity, but unfortunately little research has been devoted to better understanding their superior ability to adapt and survive in harsh, resource-poor environments (Burnham, 2002). Yousef et al. (1970) reported that donkeys are able to maintain an appetite even in water-deprived circumstances and maintain body weight, which may be one of the attributes to the donkey's ability to work in desert-type climates such as Death Valley, Nevada and withstand temperatures of up to 118°F (48°C) due to their ability to conserve blood volume and maintain an appetite while dehydrated. Mules are also readily seen working and living in such harsh environments.



This hinny makes an excellent trail mount because of its sure-footedness in rugged terrain and its reduced flight instinct, as compared to many horses.

However, donkeys and mules living in industrial countries and used for recreation or companion animal purposes are often faced with obesity issues. Other management issues that face owners include differences in behavior and training, hoof care, parasite control and even equipment used for the long eared animals. Some researchers have stated that traditional rules for horse management are detrimental to the donkey and may need to be modified for the mule (Burnham, 2002). Often times training, or even routine procedures, require more patience and effort than when working with a horse (Miller, 2007). When a dangerous situation arises, a horse, which originally developed in a plains region, is likely to bolt and run due to the strong flight mechanism, but a donkey is less likely to run away from danger, as it evolved more in hilly areas with cliffs, and a mule will display a combination of both traits (Miller, 1998; Miller, 2007). Donkeys are described to have a "fight" behavior, meaning they will not expend the energy in running away but instead will hold their ground and fight off the predator (Miller, 1998).

Some general management tips to keep in mind for both donkeys and mules:

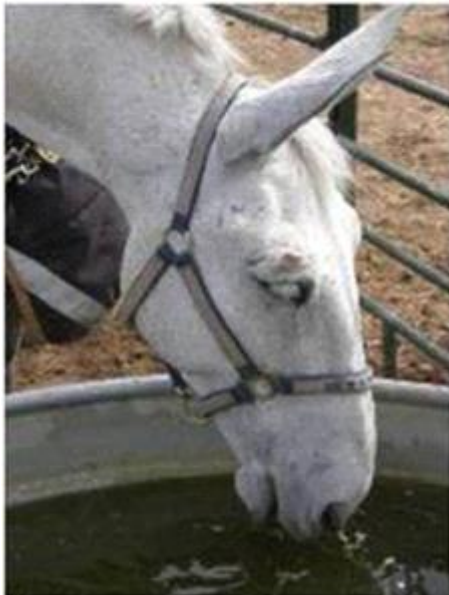
Nutritional Considerations

- Don't over feed donkeys and mules - monitor their weight closely.
- If you are dealing with an obese donkey or mule, gradually decrease their feed intake over time. Sudden feed changes could trigger metabolic issues such as hyperlipidemia.
- Donkeys tend to put on weight faster than young growing mules.
- Try to avoid cresty necks and fat pones by monitoring their feed intake - especially their nonstructural carbohydrate (starch and sugar) intake.
- Consider similar feeding regimes for donkeys (especially miniatures) that are used to feed horses with Equine Metabolic Syndrome or Insulin Resistance (a high fiber, low carbohydrate diet).
- Avoid feeding excess protein in both mule and donkey diets.
- Remember, some donkeys can get fat and become obese on a diet of pasture alone.



- Mules generally need more than just a grass pasture to maintain condition. Feed all equine according to their age, workload and environmental conditions.
- Measure feed based on weight, not volume.

Right: Many donkeys can be maintained and even become obese on a good pasture.



Above: Mules and donkeys can reach a higher level of chronic dehydration when compared to a horse. Thus, they are readily adaptable to hot climates. When a mule or donkey consumes water, however, it will drink a larger quantity at once instead of several small drinks. Mules and donkeys, like horses, can also be very fussy about new water sources.

Health considerations

- Donkeys and mules do not respond the same to various anesthesia and analgesics when compared to horses.
- Consult your veterinarian when using sedatives or NASIDS and ask them to refer to pharmacokinetic research conducted by Dr. Nora Matthews and Dr. Tex Taylor. Some of their research has shown donkeys to metabolize phenylbutazone (bute) and flunixin meglumine (Banamine) approximately five times faster than a horse, so an owner may need to administer bute or Banamine more frequently to a donkey. Always consult with your veterinarian for any drug administration.
- Mules tend to respond similar to horses to most medications.
- Donkeys and mules are both susceptible to lungworms. Consider using an anthelmintic that will address this parasite, such as ivermectin.

Behavioral Considerations

- Mules tend to respond well to twitches, but avoid twitching their ears or skin.
- Donkeys respond less positively to the twitch but may respond to leg restraint, such as hobbling or tying up a leg during farrier work.
- Handle young mule foals from day one.
- Donkeys are generally born with an investigative nature and, if habituated to humans at an early age, tend to be more forgiving than mules that are not handled at any early age.
- Both donkeys and mules enjoy the company of other equids, but some may become very stressed when their partner leaves. In fact, some mules may even become dangerous to handle when their buddy has left.



Right: Donkeys (the white animal on the left) and mules (the sorrel on the right) both enjoy companionship of other equine. These two were best of friends.

- Mules may vary in how they respond to being confined in stalls or small spaces.
- Generally, it is harder to detect colic in donkeys than mules, who will show the typical signs observed in horses. Monitor donkeys closely for food intake and water consumption.
- Both donkeys and mules enjoy rolling in sandy spots, so don't be alarmed.
- Both donkeys and mules generally become attached to their owners and form strong bonds.
- Both donkeys and mules may not respond well to dogs or cats at first until they are accustomed to them living in their environment.
- Patience is a virtue with both!



Mules and donkeys love to roll and cover themselves in dirt, so it's common to see them rolling. Do not be alarmed that they are having health-related problems such as colic.

Equipment Tips

- Often times it's hard to find equipment that properly fit mules and donkeys.
- Use common sense when fitting equipment.
- Some equipment, such as headstalls, has been made to allow for room for the donkey's broad forehead and large ears.

Hoof Care Tips

- Some donkeys, more so than mules, may be harder to handle in regards to their hooves. Their natural

response is to jerk it out of your hand or lean into you when you are handling the hoof. Use a safe restraint mechanism as well as a large diameter cotton rope to help pick up the hoof for short periods of time.

- Stay on top of the hoof care for your mules and donkeys.
- Make sure both donkeys and mules are trimmed or shod according to their conformation and not like a horse. Do not make the heel too low or the toe too long, etc. A good farrier will be able to trim or shoe your donkey and mule appropriately.
- It is not that uncommon to see abscesses in a donkey's hooves, especially those kept in wetter or more humid climates.
- Unlike horses, donkeys may exhibit laminitis in the hind limbs prior to having laminitis in the fore limbs.

Conclusion

Many equine enthusiasts are captured by the intelligence, no-nonsense disposition, and rugged athletic ability of donkeys and mules. While training styles may differ slightly, donkeys and mules can perform in any capacity that a horse can. However, donkeys and mules do have some management differences based on their anatomy and unique behavior. By practicing good donkey and mule management, you can get more enjoyment from your long eared friends, while optimizing their health and well being.



This mule is named Patches of Clouds. She is from the Sowhatchet Mule Farm in Madison, GA <http://sowhatchetmulefarminc.com/>.

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