

# **CHAPTER 1. SELECTION AND CARE**

## **1.4 CARE OF DONKEYS**

### **1.4.4 HEALTH CARE OF DONKEYS**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Although donkeys are very hardy and sturdy animals, they are susceptible to various diseases and health problems. Donkeys are more likely to resist illness if they are not overworked. It is also important that they are given sufficient food with the correct nutrients (**Module 1.4.2**), they are groomed regularly (**Module 1.4.1**) and provided with a clean, well-ventilated shelter.

The principal health problems requiring treatment are parasites, wounds and some specific illnesses. These problems and their solutions vary from country to country and place to place. There are two main sources of local information - **both** should be consulted. The local veterinary services should be able to advise on recommended vaccinations, routine treatments (such as deworming) and cures for illnesses. They may also be able to provide the necessary drugs or advice where they can be obtained. In addition, it is sensible to ask the advice of local livestock owners, particularly if there has been a long tradition of donkey ownership. In many countries, livestock owners can recommend certain management practices (areas to avoid, things to do) or traditional remedies that may help maintain the health of donkeys. In general, it is good to be cautious, and only treat one animal at a time with any new drug or remedy, just in case there is an unfortunate side-effect.

#### **INTERNAL PARASITES**

The main internal parasites of donkeys are worms that live in their stomachs and intestines. Donkeys eat worm eggs when grazing forage that has been contaminated by manure. It is therefore good to keep stables and pastures clear of droppings. Large numbers of worms make an animal skinny and weak. They reduce its ability to work, and can even cause death, particularly if an animal is underfed and/or overworked. Signs of worm infection include thinness, weakness, swollen belly, pale or yellow gums, a rough coat and dull eyes. A donkey that rubs away the hairs at the top of its tail usually has worms. Worms may be seen as thin threads in the animal's droppings. A veterinary technician can do a simple test on droppings to see if an animal has worms.

Worms are common, and it is a good practice to give all donkeys an anthelmintic (dewormer) medicine once or twice a year. This prevents worm infections from becoming too serious or life-threatening. It is good to deworm newly bought donkeys, jennies before they give birth, and all donkeys at the onset of the rains.

Local veterinary services should be consulted about deworming. They may be able to supply the deworming medicines and advice on giving them. One of the best kinds of dewormer contains the drug *Ivermectin*. Sometimes it is sold under the names *Eqvalen*, *Ivomec* and *Zimecterin*. Other suitable dewormers are sold under the names *Strongid-P*, *Panacur* and *Telmin*. Unfortunately, in some countries it is very difficult to find dewormers for donkeys. Certain dewormers made for cattle may work with donkeys if they contain the drugs *fenbendazole*, *thiabendazole* or *mebendazole*. These may be sold with the names *Thibenzole*, *Omnizole*, *Equizole*, *Valbazen*, *Synanthic* and *Verminum*. Seek advice of veterinary professionals and/or farmers. If people are not sure, only dose one animal to see how it reacts.

Deworming medicine is usually in paste form and fed by mouth. Follow the instructions given by the local veterinary technician, or those on the container. It is important that the correct dosage is given which normally depends upon the weight of the animal. A way of estimating the weight of donkeys is given in **Module 1.2.2**.

#### **EXTERNAL PARASITES**

External parasites include ticks, lice, mites and flies. They cause discomfort, weight loss and sometimes death. They can carry disease or make animals more susceptible to diseases. Places where parasites concentrate include the inside of ears, top of legs and base of tail and loose folds of skin. When an animal often rubs against trees and posts, it may have lice. Daily brushing and grooming will remove most parasites before they cause trouble. Ticks suck blood and may spread diseases. They can often be picked off by hand, but may be encouraged to release by being rubbed with an oil-soaked rag or a hot object.

Two types of fly are particularly dangerous and are common, for instance in Uganda. They are *Mucos domestica* and *Stronoty calcitrous* and are attracted to wounds on the animal (see below).

External parasites can be treated by dusting with an insecticide powder, such as 0.5% *rotenone*. Donkeys can also be sprayed or dipped but in most countries it is difficult to find sprays or dips designed for donkeys. Some farmers have found cattle dips satisfactory. Seek local advice and test one animal first.

Local remedies for treating external parasites include 50:50 mixtures of kerosene or diesel with

**BAD EFFECTS OF RAIN**

Donkeys are most comfortable in dry environments, and they can have special problems in humid areas or during the rainy season. These include rain rot, scratches and respiratory disease (pneumonia). Good shelter should be provided, with protection from the rain and a dry floor (see **Module 1.4.3**). Animals that are poorly fed, overworked or infested with parasites are more susceptible to wet conditions.

Respiratory disease is an infectious illness brought on by exposure to cold or rain. The symptoms include a thick discharge from the nostrils, coughing, listlessness and a high fever. This can be fatal. It usually requires treatment with antibiotic injections. It can be prevented by good management and dry housing.

Rain rot is a bacterial infection of the skin that comes when animals stand out in the rain. The hair falls out in patches, most often on the back and rump. It can be treated by bathing the infected areas two or three times a week with a solution of 2% iodine or 5% lime sulphur. If the skin does not heal, antibiotic injections may be required. Prevention is better than cure!

Scratches is a condition caused by wet weather and standing in mud. The skin on the back of the pasterns and heels becomes reddened, broken and perhaps oozing liquid. If it is not treated with antibiotic cream, it may result in lameness. Scratches is best prevented by keeping donkeys in a dry area, and grooming the backs of the pasterns daily to remove dirt.

**WOUNDS**

Wounds include any area of the skin that is broken, red or raw. They can be caused by accidents, fights, beating or stones thrown. Unfortunately, most wounds are caused by harnesses or packs that are improperly fitted or inadequately padded. The best prevention is to treat donkeys well and ensure harnesses and packs are well padded. If they are not treated, wounds can become infected or attacked by flies. They can stop an animal from working, and can even become life-threatening.

Wounds should be kept clean, and washed with salted water. If possible, wound ointment, sulphur powder or antibiotic cream should be applied. Wounds should be covered with a clean rag to keep flies away, as fly eggs will make the problem worse. If an abscess develops (a raised, warm, painful swelling filled with pus) apply a cloth soaked in hot water twice a day (or more often) until the lump breaks open. Drain the pus and wash using salted water or a mild disinfectant solution, then treat as a wound until it heals. Do not allow a harness or pack to press on a wound - it may make it worse and put the animal out of work for a longer time.

### LAMENESS

A lame donkey cannot work properly. Try to find the cause as soon as possible. Check which leg is causing the limp and examine it. If the donkey bobs its head up and down while moving, it may be lame on the first leg which hits the ground as the head comes up. Look at the underside of the foot for stones or abscesses. Feel the lower leg and pastern for wounds, heat or swelling. If there is a wound inside the hoof, soak the foot in a bucket of clean, warm, salty water for fifteen minutes, twice a day. For hot or swollen legs, try to apply cool water as often as possible (a running stream is good if one is available). Do not make the animal work hard until the limping stops - it will only make matters worse.

### DIGESTIVE PROBLEMS

If a donkey has not passed manure for two days it may be constipated. It may be seen rolling wildly or refusing to move. If the donkey is clearly uncomfortable and constipation is suspected, the donkey should be fed some laxative oil. Force-feeding of a small quantity of mineral oil may be an answer. If a donkey has diarrhoea, take it from any rich pasture and feed a rough forage such as maize stover. It should also be observed for signs of disease.

### DISEASES

Donkeys may get serious infectious diseases that require veterinary assistance. Local veterinary services can advise on appropriate vaccinations. It is important to vaccinate against tetanus. Some veterinarians recommend vaccination against anthrax and rabies. In some areas, African Horse Sickness is a problem. Vaccination is possible, but it can be expensive. In areas where trypanosomiasis is a problem, quarterly vaccination (prophylaxis) with a suitable drug (such as *Samorin*) may be advised.

A donkey is likely to be ill if it has a fever (hot muzzle, ears and feet), refuses to eat, appears dejected, has diarrhoea or a fast pulse. The pulse can be measured under the jaw, on the inside near the back. It should be 25 - 40 if the animal is standing still and has not been stressed or working. If it is over 60 it is too high. A high breathing rate is another indicator of ill health. For a rested donkey, a breathing rate over 30 is high, and over 40 is very high. If a donkey has a high breathing rate but otherwise appears well, it may be suffering from an allergy to dusty feeds (known as "heaves"). If this seems likely, try damping down its food.

If a donkey is ill, it must be rested and given good food and plenty of water. It should be kept away from other donkeys. Assistance should be sought if it does not improve - it may need antibiotics or other drugs.