

CARE OF THE GERIATRIC DONKEY

It is commonly believed that the natural life span of a donkey in the UK is over 40 years of age. Certainly some individuals do live to 40 and beyond, but many donkeys are showing signs of old age in their early twenties. In fact, looking back over records at the Donkey Sanctuary, we would estimate that the average life expectancy is just under 30 years. With this in mind, we would suggest that any donkey over 20 is cared for taking into consideration the following guidelines where appropriate:

- Make a record every month of your donkey's weight or heart girth measurement and his condition score. Any gradual weight change will then be spotted sooner.
- Feed him according to his weight/condition, paying particular attention to dental problems and avoiding laminitis. Small frequent meals of feed, high in digestible fibre, are often required when cheek teeth become worn and unable to grind hay and straw effectively.
- Have his teeth checked regularly, possibly every six months or as advised by your vet.
- Keep his vaccinations, particularly tetanus, up to date.
- Old donkeys need ongoing care and treatment for internal parasites.
- More frequent farriery may be required. As hooves age they may well be more easily damaged. Clean, dry, stone free conditions under foot, particularly during the winter, will help to minimise problems. Care should be taken when picking out feet as limbs and joints may be stiff.
- As old donkeys lose weight, it becomes much more important to provide them with well-fitted rugs and adequate protection from the elements. Check and refit rugs daily.
- Older donkeys are often arthritic and find steep slopes difficult to manage. Similarly, they may be less tolerant of the games and bullying of more boisterous youngsters. A flat paddock shared with companions of a similar temperament is ideal. However, a little exercise and encouragement to walk in-hand will keep old limbs active.
- Arthritis of the neck and spine, as well as arthritis of the limb joints, is not uncommon. Donkeys so affected will find eating and drinking easier if water and feed are offered at the most appropriate height - a little experimentation with raising and lowering feed and water buckets may well make life less uncomfortable.
- Don't forget old friends will enjoy daily hands-on care and grooming. Old donkeys often have thicker coats and may have some difficulty in shedding them fully, so may require more frequent grooming.