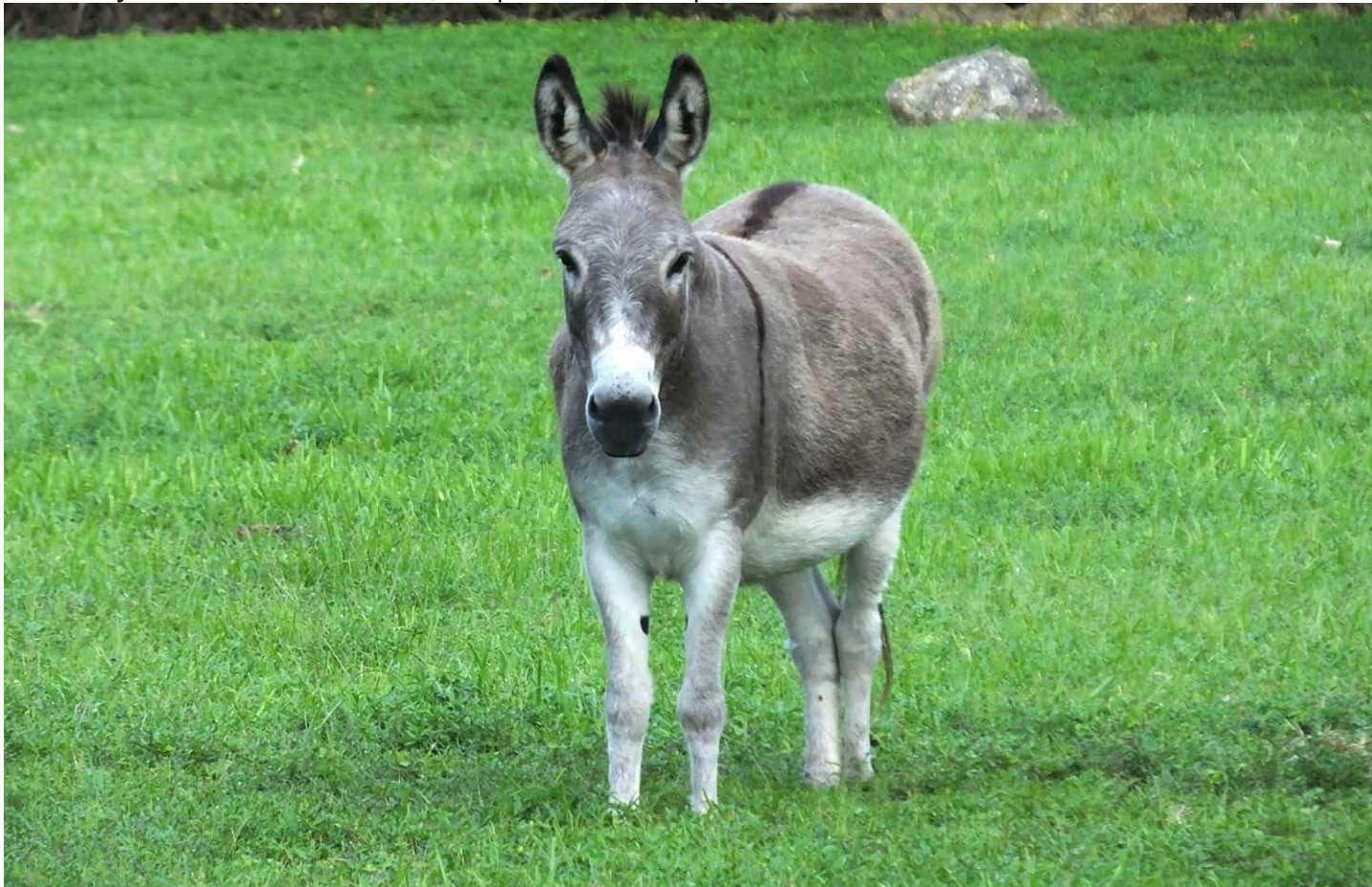


# Long in the Ears: Caring for Mules and Donkeys as They Age

Aging mules and donkeys need to be managed just as carefully as horses. Here's what you need to know.

Posted by [Christa Lesté-Lasserre, MA](#) | Mar 30, 2018 |



*They might keep a brave face, but aging mules and donkeys need just as much careful management as horses—if not more*

You know Brighty, right? Who doesn't love that sweet Grand Canyon burro made famous in the 1953 Marguerite Henry novel and as a Breyer model? Now imagine the delightful little silver donkey in his golden years. Still loved, still just as joyful and adorable. But, well, ... old. Do his ears droop? Maybe a little. Is his coat shaggier and his belly rounder? Probably. Are his teeth longer, diseased, and even a little smelly? Most likely. Does he moan and complain about all his old-man aches and pains? Not so much.

Donkeys and mules go through the same growing pains of entering old age as other equids. Many of their ailments are the same as those we see in horses. A few are slightly different. But because of their reputation for robustness, their ability to become fat eating just about anything, and their tendency to hide discomfort, the longer-eared equids often get less attention in old age than horses and ponies do. But, say our sources, they need it every bit as much. And in some ways even more.

## Long-Lived Longears

Donkeys and mules are known for longevity. There are stories of donkeys living past 50, for example. But the truth of those claims is questionable, say two donkey specialists. “Donkey teeth age differently from horse teeth, so a lot of times that can skew the aging estimates when looking at their teeth,” says Amy McLean, PhD, equine lecturer at the University of California, Davis, and board member of the American Mule Association. “I’d be curious to know who’s aging these animals.”

Donkeys that do make newspaper headlines with their age should, in any case, be considered the exception, says Alex Thiemann, MA, VetMB, Cert EP, MRCVS, veterinary surgeon at The Donkey Sanctuary, in Devon, U.K. They might live a few years longer than a horse, into their mid-30s. But, generally speaking, “owners should start to think of their average donkey (or mule) as being aged as of around 20 years,” Thiemann says. Those that have had an active work life can go into retirement around this age, she says. However, owners can continue to ride or drive many of these animals at lower intensity levels well into retirement.

## Old Stone Face

The recently developed [horse grimace scale \(HGS\)](#) provides us with information about detecting signs of discomfort in our horses’ faces. But subsequent research revealed that information doesn’t apply to donkeys and mules. They’re far more stoic, researchers agree. And they’ve also got thicker facial hair that hides expressions you’d see more easily on a Thoroughbred, for instance.

“And it’s not just the face; it’s the whole-body posture,” says Amy McLean, PhD, equine lecturer at the University of California, Davis. “I once saw a donkey suffering from peritonitis (inflammation of the abdominal lining)—which is really painful. I have three days of video of her face, but it never really changed aside from a little more blinking and opening of the nostrils.”

Donkeys are also unlikely to stop eating or drinking until they’re in the worst stages of an illness, she says.

Research teams at Utrecht University, in the Netherlands, are currently working on a grimace scale for donkeys, which will help owners and professionals avoid missing a health condition simply because the donkey didn’t “act sick or painful,” says Alex Thiemann, MA, VetMB, Cert EP, MRCVS, veterinary surgeon at The Donkey Sanctuary.

As for mules, the fact that they’re more closely related to horses doesn’t give them an advantage. “They’re very robust and probably even worse at showing pain behavior than donkeys,” says Thiemann.

—Christa Lesté-Lasserre, MA

## Tough Little Guys

Humanity has long considered longears hardier than other equids. And they are, when it comes to ailments such as infectious diseases and parasite infections, to which they’re much more resistant, McLean says. “There are a lot of diseases, like [African horse sickness](#), for which they’re carriers but never show clinical signs,” she says. “And they’re able to live with high levels of parasites. They can have higher fecal egg counts than horses but have a better [body score](#).”



That reputation can be a double-edged sword, because many people assume they must be tough no matter the health issue. However, donkeys are very susceptible to dental issues, hoof ailments, and metabolic diseases, to name a few. Their apparent hardiness and their tendency to “suffer quietly” mean many owners overlook such issues.

## He’s Still Got Some Bite (and Kick)

Donkey or mules need regular dental and farrier visits “as much as horses do, but the general attitude is, ‘Well it’s a donkey/mule, so I don’t have to do this,’ whereas actually they do need it,” McLean says. Both are critical to their health and welfare.

Donkeys and mules should see a dentist every year, then twice a year as seniors, and they should get farrier care every six to eight weeks, just like a barefoot horse. If that care has been neglected in the younger years, it’s all the more important in old age. “Unfortunately, because many donkeys aren’t ridden and don’t get bits in their mouths, owners often neglect their teeth,” Thiemann says. “So by the time they get to old age you see quite pronounced displacement of the molars, big overgrowths in the back or the front, maybe diastemas (gaps between teeth) and periodontal disease. Dental disease is a huge problem because it’s hidden from the owner.”



Many donkeys get overfed and maintain good body condition, she adds, often masking the effects of dental issues. “They go on eating grass like nothing’s wrong when actually there’s something really wrong,” says McLean. A good hint that their teeth are suffering? Bad breath. If the donkey won’t complain, the humans around him might because periodontal disease causes a particular odor, our sources say. And if it stinks, it’s probably also really painful, no matter how comfortable the donkey or mule might appear. “Pretty much every aging donkey will have severe dental disease, so that has to be managed,” Thiemann says.

Donkey and mule feet grow, crack, and get diseased just like horse feet do. So don’t skip regular farriery. Unfortunately, many farriers would rather not do donkey feet, Thiemann says. “Donkeys don’t always behave well for farriers because they’re not trained and manipulated on a regular basis like horses often are, so it can be tricky getting a farrier willing to work on them.” If that’s the case, the feet can “grow to extraordinary lengths” by old age, she says. Be kind to your farrier: Make sure you’re training your donkey or mule to cooperate during regular foot care, she says.

## Topline Trouble

The classic image of the aging donkey (or mule) gives him a swayback look, with his topline diving down in the middle. It’s not unusual for these animals to appear this way in old age because they lose their topline very easily, says McLean. At the same time, they’re getting a bigger belly that’s pulling down on that topline, with gravity that “takes over with age.” Then they’ve got a longer back and loin area compared to the underline, putting them at a greater risk than horses for weakness, she says.

“Good exercise can help keep that topline from falling too much in seniors,” McLean says. “We do side-to-side and under-the-leg exercises with carrots, and even lateral exercises like for a riding horse. Carrot exercises are so easy with donkeys because they respond very well to food.”

## Eat Like a Donkey

A donkey’s metabolism just isn’t made for the kinds of diets we feed horses and ponies. “Donkeys evolved from animals that survived on very little, in Africa and Asia, browsing a poor-quality, high-fiber diet more than grazing grass,” Thiemann says. “And they’ve adapted well to that. Donkeys need one-third less calorie intake than a pony of the same size. So they often need restricted grazing.”



They’ve also got a much longer gastrointestinal transit time, McLean adds. “They can eat on Monday, and the food’s still with them on Thursday or Friday.”

And because they have slightly different gut bacteria than horses, Thiemann says, their colons absorb more water from a very fibrous diet. To meet the particular needs of its aging donkeys and mules, The Donkey Sanctuary keeps them on a predominantly straw-based diet with mineral/vitamin supplements, rather than a hay-based diet.

If their teeth are deteriorating, however, they're at risk of impaction colic. "In that case, we move them onto a bedding of shavings and a diet that's pre-chopped but still low-calorie," Thiemann says.

## **Warning: PPID and Laminitis**

An overfed donkey or mule is at high risk for developing metabolic issues and that risk increases as they become older and more sedentary. "[Laminitis](#) is very common in donkeys, but by the time they show signs of it, it's often too late for management," McLean says.

Unlike laminitic horses that shift their weight and have performance issues, affected donkeys simply lie down and remain fairly stoic, says Thiemann. "We'll often see quite advanced laminitis changes in our donkeys, with laminitic rings on the external hoof wall and with rotations and sinking of the pedal (coffin) bones," she says.

Regular checkups by a professional farrier can help detect these issues, our sources say. So can a familiarity with the classic signs of pain in a donkey.

...[Pituitary pars intermedia dysfunction \(PPID, or equine Cushing's disease\)](#) is as common in mules and donkeys as it is in horses. But again, the warnings are far more difficult to detect. "The biggest signs are not shedding the hair coat and the fat deposits," McLean says. "But fat deposits are common even in healthy donkeys. In mules the fat deposits are going to be more specific to PPID."

The current PPID treatment for these animals is the same as for horses: pergolide. Unfortunately, however, the medication isn't perfectly adapted to long-eared equids. Donkeys and mules "don't like it," and it can make them go off their feed, Thiemann says, putting them at risk of secondary disease. "If a donkey goes off his feed, he's more likely to get hyperlipidemia (high fat levels in the blood) than a big horse," she says, which can cause lethargy, weakness, decreased water intake, and diarrhea.





## Exercise and Maintenance

The last thing an old donkey or mule needs is solitude in a bare paddock. “An older donkey needs [enrichment activities](#) (that encourage movement) in the field or be taken on walks or continued to be exercised, even longed,” McLean says. “It’s important for their physical and their mental health.”

As they age, though, consider turning them out in flatter fields that are easier on old bones and joints, says Thiemann. As their sight deteriorates, make sure their environment stays the same and that they have a regular buddy. Finally, choose shavings over straw as bedding, which can allow mules and donkeys to rest more comfortably, reducing the number of times they have to lie down and get up. Aging donkeys and mules require plenty of TLC from their caretakers. “They need careful grooming, which is a time when owners can check for tumors, lice, and discharge from the eyes—all of which they’re susceptible to as their immune systems start to run down,” Thiemann says. While donkeys aren’t very susceptible to melanoma, despite many being gray, they do get sarcoids, sarcomas, and other tumors that you might be able to identify by hand.

Keep an eye out for any signs of joint pain from [osteoarthritis](#) that comes with age. Although it might be hard even for a veterinarian to detect, donkeys could show some signs of the condition. The main sites are in the upper joints—hip, shoulder, spine—unlike competition animals, whose lower joints are more frequently affected due to overuse.

And don’t forget good deworming programs, including for lungworms. Donkeys don’t develop disease in response to lungworms, our sources say, but they can carry and shed it, making them a source of infection for horses, which are susceptible to lungworms’ effects.

# Keeping Old Bones (and Ears!) Warm



Donkeys aren't meant for the cold. "They come from hotter climates and don't grow woolly coats, so they do feel colder," Thiemann says. Researchers have shown that donkeys grow a longer—but not thicker—hair coat in winter. And they definitely seek shelter more frequently than ponies do. "Their hair coat hasn't developed to be as cozy for them in cold winters as horses' and ponies' have," she says. And they feel the freeze all the more as they grow older.

**Blanketing** is a good idea but, given their particular shape (longer backs, thinner build), custom-made blankets work best and cause less rubbing, our sources say. Heat lamps in barns can also help keep them warm, Thiemann says. And a good supply of low-calorie forage helps their bodies generate heat, McLean adds.

As for those ears, "they're more susceptible to frostbite," McLean says. Consider putting bonnets on long ears in the winter, and keep them indoors when the weather's both cold and wet.

## Saying Goodbye

Donkeys might suffer in silence a long time, and it's up to us to make the difficult decision to let them go in peace. But while euthanasia might ease one donkey's suffering, it might increase another's. Donkeys and mules bond so closely with their buddies that losing one can be especially hard—enough, in fact, that they might stop eating.

"It's quite a high-risk period for the donkey left behind," says Alex Thiemann, MA, VetMB, Cert EP, MRCVS, veterinary surgeon at The Donkey Sanctuary. "It's important for him to come to terms with the loss."

At The Donkey Sanctuary, handlers often keep the friend present while the companion is euthanized. "We offer him a feed and let him stay with the body for a half an hour or so, so they're not just braying and trying to understand what happened," she says. "Afterward, we ensure he gets lots of attention, and we find another companion for him very quickly."

—Christa Lesté-Lasserre, MA

## Long Ears, Big Hearts

Donkeys and mules are highly social animals that need lots of attention. And those needs continue into old age. They need stable companionship, familiar environments, and, if they've learned to like people, human interaction.

"Old donkeys are very sweet, often very inquisitive, and they want to help me on my vet rounds," Thiemann says. "If they've had a positive relationship with humans all their life, they'll follow you around the field. But if they've had negative emotions with humans,

they can be challenging and feisty. Whatever mistakes you've made in that animal's emotional upbringing will come home to roost when they're old."

McLean agrees. "They're researchers," she says. "They really do like interaction and are very social. Of all equids, the donkeys are like big dogs; there's just something about their souls. The mules, as well. I've found a really unique bond with mules that I've yet to find with a horse."

So get out there in that field with them regularly, and give them plenty of attention and activity.

## Take-Home Message

The beloved donkey or mule can make a delightful companion or even sporting animal. If he's learned to feel safe around humans, he can be a true and trusted friend well into old age. But his stoic disposition might mask the effects of age. It's time to get past the idea that donkeys and mules don't need scrupulous care because they're tough and, instead, provide them with the treatment, warmth, companionship, and attention they need, throughout their golden years.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



### **[Christa Lesté-Lasserre, MA](#)**

Passionate about horses and science from the time she was riding her first Shetland Pony in Texas, Christa Lesté-Lasserre writes about scientific research that contributes to a better understanding of all equids. After undergrad studies in science, journalism, and literature, she received a master's degree in creative writing. Now based in France, she aims to present the most fascinating aspect of equine science: the story it creates. Follow Lesté-Lasserre on Twitter [@christalestelas](#).