

# The Dull Donkey



The donkey is very stoical in nature, which can make detection of sickness and disease very difficult. Dullness and depression are frequently the only symptoms exhibited for a number of conditions, including severe and life threatening illness. Donkeys are affected by many of the same conditions as horses, but may present in a different way e.g. colic presenting as dullness only. Any dull donkey should be promptly examined by a vet to prevent development of hyperlipaemia, a potentially fatal condition.

## How do I know if my donkey is 'dull'?

In order to recognise when there is a problem, it is important for owners to recognise normal behaviour for their donkey. Many healthy donkeys, particularly older individuals, can be very quiet. Abnormally dull behaviour is a response to pain or generalised illness.

Signs of dullness may include:

- lack of normal behaviour patterns;
- not eating (anorexia)/ sham eating;
- reluctance to move;
- lying down;
- lowered head carriage;
- altered ear posture (helicopter ears);
- self-isolation.

Subtle changes in behaviour that might be early indicators of disease are difficult to detect, so a donkey might be at an advanced stage of a disease before a diagnosis is reached. This is why a dull donkey should be regarded as a veterinary emergency.

## DIAGNOSIS

A full history will be taken, so it is important to highlight any previous illness or potential recent stress factors e.g. changes in companions or environment. Your vet will conduct a full clinical examination, often including a rectal and oral examination.

Some cases can be diagnosed following a history and clinical examination, but some may require further investigations such as blood tests, ultrasound scans and x-rays before reaching a diagnosis.

Major causes of dullness include:

- Non-specific 38%
- Colic 20%
- Primary hyperlipaemia 15%
- Liver disease 5%
- Foot lameness 5%
- Respiratory disease 4 %
- Other (dental disease, fever, loss of companion, arthritis, multiple geriatric problems).



**ULTRASOUND  
SCAN OF THE  
LIVER:  
LIVER DISEASE  
IS THE CAUSE IN  
5% OF CASES.**

## KEY POINTS

- Donkeys have a stoic nature so it is difficult to recognise illness.
- Dullness might be the only symptom of a serious condition.
- Dullness can have many causes.
- Any cause of dullness can lead to secondary hyperlipaemia, a serious complication.
- Any dull donkey warrants a prompt veterinary examination.

## Treatment

Treatment of the dull donkey depends on determining a cause. In many cases a diagnosis may not be reached at the first veterinary examination. This often means supportive treatment is given to the donkey while further investigations e.g. blood tests are carried out.

**Nutrition** is very important as failure to eat will lead to secondary hyperlipaemia.

Sham feeding is common in a sick donkey; this is where the donkey appears to eat, but does not actually swallow food.

If the donkey will not eat its normal food, then alternative feeds should be tried. Hand feeding may also help. Carrots, apples, peppermint cordial, ginger nut biscuits and brambles may tempt an inappetant donkey.

**Grooming and nursing care** of the sick donkey is also very important.

**Minimise ongoing stress** during treatment as this can exacerbate or lead to hyperlipaemia. Keeping the sick donkey together with its bonded companion is also important and can help recovery.

**Further treatments** may include:

- oral fluids
- intravenous fluids
- anti-inflammatory medication/pain relief
- treatment of the primary cause.

Many XLEquine practices regularly liaise with The Donkey Sanctuary with regard to treatment and management of donkeys. XLEquine would like to acknowledge the work they do to transform the quality of life of donkeys in the UK and abroad. The Donkey Sanctuary is a charity that will never turn away from a donkey in need. They rely on donations to continue providing for donkeys and mules worldwide.

[www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk](http://www.thedonkeysanctuary.org.uk)



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**INTRAVENOUS CATHETER PLACEMENT**



**INTRAVENOUS FLUID THERAPY**



XLEquine is a novel and exciting initiative conceived from within the veterinary profession made up of independently owned, progressive veterinary practices located throughout the United Kingdom, members of XLEquine are committed to working together for the benefit of all their clients.  
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