

What do you know about Mules?



What is a mule?

- A **Mule** is a hybrid animal that results from the mating of a **male donkey** called a jack, and a **female horse** called a mare. (Remember: **Dad Donkey, Mom Mare**)
- A **Hinny** is just the opposite, a cross between a **male horse** called a stallion, and a **female donkey** called a jenny
- A young male mule is called a **colt** and a young female mule is called a **filly**
- Hinnies and mules are classified together under the general term mule
- A mule or hinny **male** is called a **John**, and a **female** is called a **Molly**
- Both male and female mules have all the correct “parts” but they are infertile and cannot reproduce. This is because horses and donkeys are different species, with different numbers of chromosomes (horses have 64, donkeys 62, and mules 63) and this mismatch makes them sterile and unable to reproduce.
- The mule is a renowned example of “hybrid vigor,” which produces superior qualities in the crossbreeding of genetically different animals. Charles Darwin wrote: *“The mule always appears to me a most surprising animal. That a hybrid should possess more reason, memory, obstinacy, social affection, powers of muscular endurance, and length of life than either of its parents, seems to indicate that art has here outdone nature.”*
- Mules can live 40 or more years if well cared for and not overworked, thanks to modern medicine and better feed, but “anything over 25 years is a gift” (Mark Myers). Each human year = 3 mule years, so a 12-year-old mule is like a 36-year-old human.

What do mules look and sound like?

- The mule's **conformation** (structure and arrangement of its parts) is a combination of traits from both parents. The head, hip and legs usually take after the jack (donkey dad) and the size is mostly determined by the size of the mare (horse mom). The mule may grow taller than either parent.
- A mule's ears are usually somewhat smaller than a donkey's, and longer but the same shape as a horse's. Mules often like to be stroked inside their ears by people they like.
- Mules have "combination hair," usually a thin forelock, coarse mane hair, and a tail more like the horse parent—haired all the way to the top, while a donkey's tail has a tuft on the end like a cow.
- Mules can be any of the colors that either horses or donkeys come in—from shades of grey to brown to chestnut to black—along with some unique variations of their own.
- Mules usually have brown or tan-colored points. Some mules do not have any light points at all, but this is unusual. Old-timers used to call a dark muzzled mule "blue nosed."
- Mules come in every size and shape imaginable, from minis under 36" to maxis over 70" tall, and can weigh from 50 to 2,000 pounds. Mules can be lightweight, medium weight, or even—when produced from draft horse mares—of moderately heavy weight. Typical C&O Canal mules weigh around 1,000 pounds and are around 15 hands high (about 60" or 5 feet).
- A mule does not sound exactly like a donkey or a horse. Most have a unique sound that is a combination of the horse's whinny and the donkey's bray—starting with a whinny, and ending in a hee-haw. Every mule or hinny has a unique bray. Sometimes mules whimper.

What do mules eat and drink?

- Mules pretty much eat everything horses eat, especially highly fibrous foods like grasses, alfalfa or barley hay, carrots and apples. They have taste buds, so they may not like some things. They should never be fed bread, donuts, or other starchy foods that can clump up in their stomachs and cause them great distress and even endanger their lives. They cannot throw-up like people can, so everything has to come out the other end.
- They need less food, pound for pound, than horses, with a much more efficient digestive tract, needing only around 1.5% of their body weight per day, compared to a horse's 2.5%, though this varies somewhat depending on how much work they do.
- Mules can drink as much as 15 gallons or more of water on a hot day. Mules endure heat and lack of water much better than horses, gaining this trait from their donkey father, who is built more for desert life.

What are some other important characteristics of mules?

- Mules require less maintenance than horses, having fewer leg and hoof problems, and fewer medical problems overall. If they primarily work on softer ground (not concrete or exceptionally stony ground) they don't even need to be shod.
- Mules have more stamina and can carry more weight than horses of a similar size. A mule can carry upwards of 20% of its body weight, and walk for 80 miles or more without resting.
- Mules are more patient, sure-footed, agile, hardy and long-lived than horses, and they are considered less obstinate, faster, and more affectionate than donkeys. They are tougher, have greater endurance, and demonstrate higher intelligence than either of their parent species.
- Handlers of working animals generally find mules preferable to horses. Mules show more patience under the pressure of heavy weight, and their skin is harder and less sensitive than that of horses, making them more capable of enduring heat, sun and insects. Their hooves are harder than horses', and they show a natural resistance to disease and insects.
- It is said that, "If a horse is like a race car and an ox is like a tractor, a mule is like a pick-up truck."
- Mules live longer than horses (40 years or more, compared to around 30 years for horses). They also have a greater number of productive years, averaging about 18 years to a horse's 15 years of productivity on a farm-like setting. Further, mules can be used as many as 30-40 years for riding.
- Mules like to work in pairs, and prefer not to be alone. Mules of the same gender tend to work well together, though there is a "pecking order" based on age and size.
- Mules are thought to see in black and white, not in color (similar to dogs).
- Mules can sleep standing up or lying down, just like horses and donkeys. Most will sleep standing up, though they may lie down when they are sure that there is no harm from predators. If they are in a herd, one or more will remain standing while one lies down to sleep. Mules, donkeys and horses need deep REM sleep, just like people, though not as much as people do.

What do people often misunderstand about mules?

- It is a mistaken notion that mules are stubborn or lazy. In fact, mules are "risk averse" and will not put themselves in danger; this trait should be regarded as independence and free will, not stubbornness. A horse can be over-worked to the point of death, but a mule has a much stronger sense of self-preservation than to allow this. The "stubborn streak" is just the mule's way of telling humans that something is not right, or there's a problem.

- Mules are “big thinkers,” and will question the world around them. They will stand and think about the best way to deal with a problem rather than unquestioningly follow a handler; they tend to be quicker and more accurate problem-solvers than horses or donkeys. Mules rarely injure themselves in accidents due to their inherent sense of self-preservation, and tend to be sensible if they become entrapped; they will wait for help calmly rather than struggle and injure themselves more.
- Mules are quick to learn good habits and also quick to learn bad habits, which means that handlers really do need to get things right first time! Mules are independent thinkers, and the aim of all training should be to ensure that the mule is a willing partner and views what is being asked of it as reasonable, and to its advantage.

What is the best way to interact with mules?

- Mules are very aware of their surroundings. Take care not to sneak up on them! Don’t approach them quickly, loudly or without warning. At the Park and along the towpath, mules don’t like kayaks, loud vehicles with sirens, or anything unexpected. Visitors—especially bikers and dogs—should always keep a safe distance so as not to startle the mule, unless its handlers invite them to move in closer.
- Mules are not usually fazed or disconcerted by dogs, and do not mind horses (though mollies will tend to “flirt” with stallions).
- Kicking is a perfectly natural behavior for a mule, and it may use its feet, teeth or body as a weapon if it feels threatened. A well-trained mule that has been treated with respect does not kick without very good reason.
- Mules can kick in all directions (forward, backward and sideways with both back and front feet), and with precision (can kick a fly off their ear). The speed and accuracy of a mule kick is superior to that of any other equine. Mules may not move as quickly as horses (top speed 15 mph) but they certainly have faster reaction times than horses or donkeys.
- Mules will nearly always warn of their intention to kick (humans are often slow to pick up on this) with signs that may include a swishing tail, pinned ears, swung hindquarters or a lifted leg.
- Mules often give warning kicks, which will miss; if a mule misses when it kicks, it never intended to get you in the first place.
- It is wise to remember, "There is no education in the second kick of a mule" (attributed to Ernest F. Hollings, former Governor and US Senator from South Carolina). In other words, some important lessons really should not have to be repeated!
- Mules feel with their lips. When touching a mule’s mouth, use a flat hand (like a plate) so the mule does not mistake a finger for a carrot.
- Mules tend to bond strongly to people, but can take a long time to trust. They are naturally suspicious and may appear aloof or frightened of people. When a mule trusts its handlers it will allow them to do virtually anything, but may not allow unfamiliar people to try the same thing.
- Mules are known to be loyal and gentle to their handlers and familiar people, though it is wise to remember that, “All mules kick some of the time, and some mules kick all of the time.”



Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Class: Mammalia
Order: Perissodactyla
Family: Equidae
Genus: Equus
Scientific Name: Equus Mule
Type: Mammal
Diet: Herbivore

Sources:

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