

Senior Horse Management



With today's medical advances, research and improved horse management, horses are living longer and longer lives! In previous years, many horses were considered old when in their late teens. However, these days, it is not unusual to see a horse live into its late twenties or thirties, allowing us to spend plenty of quality time with our equine senior citizens. Proper management can prove the golden rule to ensuring your horse remains happy and comfortable into his golden years.

Routine Care

Even though your elderly horse may be retired or have a decreased workload, it is important to ensure that he still receives routine care. Give your horse a daily once over to check for any new or worsening problems such as cuts or lameness. Make sure he stays well groomed and has his hooves cleaned regularly. Maintain an allergen/dust free environment especially for older horses with heaves. If your horse is housed indoors overnight, rubber mats are a wonderful addition to any horses stall. The elderly equine will be thankful for a softer surface to rest their aging joints. Stall bedding should be deep enough to be comfortable but not so deep that they have trouble rising. Your horse should be seen routinely by both the veterinarian and farrier, whether he is in work or not.

Health Check

Much like people, elderly horses are often more susceptible to health problems. It is important to keep seniors up to date on vaccinations and schedule an annual or bi-annual check-up with your veterinarian. Prevention is the best cure!

Gut motility issues are more common in older horses, which can lead to an increased risk of colic. Other issues in the senior gastro-intestinal tract which elevate the risk of colic can include tumors or increased parasite load. Difficulty in chewing feed can result in undigested food entering the gut which can also lead to gas or impaction colic. Older horses tend to have a reduced drive to drink and inadequate intake of water is also a risk factor.

Watch for melanomas and skin cancer particularly in older grey horses.

Older horses are prone to disorders such as Equine Metabolic Syndrome and pituitary pars intermedia dysfunction (PPID, formerly known as Cushing's).

Many older horses also suffer from pain due to arthritis. If possible, keep them moving around by extending their turn out time. Any discomfort or pain should be addressed by a veterinarian who can suggest treatment options.

Hoof Care

Hoof care is routine care which helps minimize stress on the joints and hoof structures. The retired horse needs this care just as much as horses currently in work.



This 18 year old pony has retired from upper level eventing but is still used for pleasure and trail riding.

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With their own challenges of stiff joints and arthritic limbs, seniors benefit from a farrier that understands the older horse may not be as flexible. Limbs may not want to lift as high and the support of a hoofjack can be a welcome relief for the senior who is not so steady supporting their weight on three legs.

The threat of laminitis does increase in older horses, especially if they develop a metabolic disorder. These senior hooves require extra attention and input from both veterinarian and farrier.

Dentistry

Extra diligence needs to be paid to dental health in the senior horse. Horses' front teeth continually erupt at an angle that increases as they age. Cases of unbalanced chewing surfaces escalate as the horse ages. Horses wear down their teeth as they chew but that wear is not always even. The development of sharp points in the mouth is much higher in the elderly equine and this can result in ulcerations, reluctance to chew their food, poor digestion and a higher incidence of choke. Severely uneven wear can lead to a condition called 'wave mouth'.

Missing or loose teeth can lead to 'step mouth' which requires regular inspection and care as food can get packed in leading to dental disease, abscess or infection.

In very elderly horses, the teeth may lose their rough edges and become entirely smooth which results in an inability to grind food. Horses with smooth mouth should be fed highly digestible feeds that are easy to eat, such as soaked hay cubes or beet pulp – your veterinarian or equine nutritionist will be able to recommend the best course of management.

Maintaining good dental health into old age is probably one of the single best ways to encourage longevity. It is far more difficult to address and fix a chronic dental issue once the horse has reached later age. Annual dental exams are recommended for all horses and twice a year for elderly horses. Foul odors coming from the mouth, nasal discharge, loose incisors, broken teeth, red or inflamed gums, quidding, weight loss, not finishing feed and resistance to the bridle are all reasons to call the vet and have the teeth checked. If you notice your horse is no longer chewing in a regular circular pattern this can be an indicator of sharp points and uneven wear which also warrants a veterinary appointment for dental care. Some elderly horses may have little or no teeth at all, so special care must be taken to make sure they are receiving adequate nutrition.

Nutrition

Feeding the senior horse can be a challenging task! Some seniors have difficulty keeping weight on, while others go up a girth size at the sight of grass. It is important to develop a diet and exercise program that meets your horse's individual needs. Many feed companies have developed feeds specifically for the senior horse which are often higher in protein content and extruded to break down the courser elements.

The senior horse that is dropping pounds requires a closer look. Dental care may need to be addressed if they are not grinding their food properly. If the enamel is soft, teeth are missing or worn, changes may need to be made from coarse feeds to softer ones. Easy to digest supplements may include

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vegetable oil. Stay on the lookout for quidding (chewing then dropping balled up wads of food) as this indicates a dental problem.

One needs to rule out factors which can cause weight loss such as parasite burden, tumors and infections. Winters can begin to take a tougher toll on the senior horse. They may require an increase in feed and a blanket to help stay warm. Checking body condition score should be part of every senior horse's weekly routine. Old age is no excuse for an overly thin equine— body condition score should be between four and seven. Discuss with your veterinarian or equine nutritionist the best methods to satisfy your senior's dietary needs and make any dietary changes slowly.

What age is old? – Fitness for Health

The saying “you're only as old as you feel” certainly applies to horses. Some horses may be considered elderly at 15, while others are still actively ridden at 25. Use it or lose it relates to horses just as much as humans. An unused muscle will deteriorate over time. Tendons and ligaments which have seen their fair share of work will weaken over time. The senior horse's exercise regime should be carefully considered in order to encourage mobility for health without putting undue stress on old injuries or areas of particular weakness.

Exercise is also important for helping maintain healthy gut function. Lack of movement weakens muscles and bones. In many cases, mild exercise can help reduce inflammation in tendons, ligaments and joints. Exercise can also help prevent the senior horse from gaining too much weight. Letting an elder become obese puts added strain on their joints.

Old injuries and wear and tear may mean the aging horse will need to have its athletic ventures scaled back, but the benefits of maintaining an active lifestyle can be healthier joints. Work with your veterinarian to decide what level of activity is suitable for your horse.

The Senior Social Circle

Herd dynamics change on a regular basis and not just when a new horse is introduced to the field. Seniority may mean something in the workplace among humans but in the paddock it is the most dominant, strongest horses that eat and drink first.

One way to help your senior horse to their fair share of resources is to create as many hay piles as there are occupants in the paddock and provide more than one water source. Space the hay out far enough to let each horse eat uninterrupted. If the older equid is not chomping down food as quickly as his paddock mates, this may not be an adequate solution. Consider splitting them up into a smaller and less dominant group or feeding them separately. Also think about keeping your retirees separated from horses that travel frequently to reduce the risk of contracting infectious disease.

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