



MANAGING THE HORSE IN OLD AGE

After a horse is mature it is sometimes said that one year of a horse's life equals three years of a human's. So, the 20-year-old horse is comparable to the 60-year-old human. Horses frequently reach the age of 30-40 under today's management. As horses show signs of becoming older, some special consideration needs to be given to their care. Especially with cold weather coming up, it is important to look after our veterans well.

The physical signs that the older horse shows may vary but will often include the following:

1. Loss of muscle tone, resulting in a flabby or "pot-belly" appearance
2. Change of weight distribution; they may deposit fat in one place yet appear skinny in others
3. Change in facial appearance, such as drooping of the lower lip and deepening of the pockets above the eye
4. Coat changing colour and/or rough, dull, long hairs that don't shed out properly

The older horse is more likely to encounter medical problems, which may include:

Dental problems: Poor teeth result in difficulty in efficient chewing and digesting food. The horse's teeth constantly grow out, each year wearing off a certain amount until eventually there is no longer any tooth left. For many horses the loss of their teeth and inability to chew presents a major problem. Modern feedstuffs allow us to provide fibre through soaked nuts, that still allow us to feed these horses well. A yearly, at minimum, examination of the teeth is important. Rasping the teeth removes sharp points on the premolars and molars and enhances the horse's ability to chew and digest. In the very old horse the teeth may have very little root left to hold the tooth into the gum and jaw. By floating loose teeth it is possible to loosen these teeth, but at least the horse will be kept in comfort.

Liver and kidney problems: These problems can show a variety of signs. The animal may be dull, listless, stumbling or dragging the back feet. They may also have

a poor or excellent appetite but be unable to gain weight. They may drink excess amounts of water and urinate excessively. A blood screen can help diagnose these problems, and treatment includes diet changes and sometimes medication.

Lung problems: Through years of inhaling allergens and dust spores, the older horse may be left with poor lungs. Excess mucus and narrowing of the small airways may need treating. Controlling the environment (haylage, soaked hay, woodchip bedding) and sometimes long term or recurrent medication may need to be discussed with your vet.

Hormone problems: Tumours of the pituitary gland (a gland located in the brain) can result in the adrenal gland producing too many hormones. These horses will have a long, rough, curly coat, which usually never sheds. They may also have a greater loss of muscle tone, resulting in a more pronounced swayback. Cushing's disease is the name for the disease caused by these tumours. Laminitis is one of the most painful problems that can be caused by these hormone imbalances.

Weight problems: Obesity may be seen in the more geriatric horse due to feeding too much, thyroid problems or lack of exercise. The extra weight puts additional stress on the horse with lung and heart problems and aggravates arthritis, laminitis and navicular disease.

Lipomas or fatty tumours are more likely to be found in the older fat horse. These fatty tumours are generally inside the abdomen of the horse and often look like a large mushroom. They can wrap around intestines, causing blockages, circulation collapse, colic and even death.

Too much weight loss can also be a problem in more geriatric horses. As the horse ages, there is often a reduced efficiency in the digestive system. It is believed that the older horse may need a 10 to 20% increase in feed to make up for the loss of efficiency. Researchers have determined that older horses need higher-quality protein, more digestible energy and increased minerals, as compared to the maintenance requirements of the adult horse.

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Horses over 20 years of age often have the same requirements as yearlings. Once an older horse loses weight, it is more difficult to return it to good body condition. Sometimes, no matter what is fed, the horse does not gain weight. Recently the addition of sources of fats to the feed has been widely advocated to help these horses. I have seen great results from adding oil (up to a pint a day for a small hunter) to the feed. The biggest challenge is to provide high quality fibre, in a palatable way, without filling the horse up too fast. Otherwise, they are predisposed to develop colic.

Vitamins: The older horse may have certain medical problems that require vitamin supplements. However, administering large doses of vitamins is not always beneficial. Because of the metabolism in the older horse, it is not able to deal with an excess of vitamins, and over supplementing may result in liver and kidney damage or failure

Leg Problems: As with human athletes, years of stress, injuries and general wear and tear can result in painful and crippling arthritic changes in older horses. Also as with humans, the cold, damp conditions of winter can make arthritis pain even worse. Do not keep your horse confined to a stable, unless recommended by your vet. Ideally there should be free access to turnout, but good shelter from the elements should also be available. The more the horse has an opportunity for exercise the better. It is common for the arthritic horse to become reluctant to lie down, due to difficulty in getting back up. Be sure to use enough bedding. Not only will bedding provide warmth, but it will also provide cushion for elbows and hocks. Laminitis is more likely to occur in the older horse, and can be a serious concern for suffering in the geriatric horse. If you suspect that your horse may have lameness problems or finds it difficult to rise, be sure to call your vet.

Painkiller therapy, joint injections or supplements may have to be considered in a bid to keep the older horse pain-free!

Wintering: the geriatric horse is somewhat more challenging, but can be successfully accomplished. Rugging may also be needed in the more severe winter climates. Proper fit is essential when blanketing any horse. If using a turnout rug, be sure the material is water resistant and breathable. Blankets should only be used if someone is available to check them at least twice a day. Pressure sores through wearing rugs are a common problem in older horses with protruding bones.

Summary

Geriatric horses can live comfortably for years. The winter season, however, provides an extra challenge. Adequate shelter, good footing with the ability to exercise freely, free access to fresh, unfrozen water, good quality forage and feed are all necessary for geriatric horses to survive the elements of winter weather. Work with your vet to ensure the teeth, feet and general body condition and health are maintained as they should be. Sometimes blood samples may help to assess organ health. Older horses are more likely to be sensitive to infections and parasite burdens. Good worm control and vaccination should therefore be maintained.

When the times comes, giving the horse a peaceful end to its life will also have to be discussed with your vet. In cases of longstanding disease it is a privilege that euthanasia is an option, but the responsibility of making the right decision in the interest of the horse can be difficult.