

EASING YOUR HORSE'S

Golden

YEARS

Because of improvements in nutrition, management, and health care, horses are living longer, more useful lives. It's not at all uncommon to find horses and ponies living well into their 20s and even 30s. By ensuring that your horse receives proper care and nutrition, you can help make his golden years happier and more productive.

Of course, time does take its toll on all of the horse's internal systems. The digestive tract loses efficiency. Bones and joints are less resilient and arthritis is common. The immune system is more easily compromised, making older horses more prone to illness and slower to recover from both disease and injury. Parasite infestations also take a heavier toll. Aged horses are more susceptible to respiratory, eye, and dental problems and they are less able to cope with environmental stresses such as extreme heat, cold, wet, or wind. In addition, hormonal changes may affect overall body condition, hair growth, appetite, and energy levels. However, it is very important to keep in mind that while some signs of decline may be directly related to the aging

process, others may be manifestations of an underlying medical problem, so be sure to consult with your veterinarian.

While all aspects of horse health care are important, proper nutrition is vital. Hormonal and metabolic changes in the older horse can affect or interfere with the ability to digest, absorb, and utilize essential nutrients, especially protein, phosphorus, and fiber. Therefore, many older horses benefit from complete rations with built-in roughage that are specially formulated to compensate for changes in their digestive physiology.

A senior horse's diet should be:

- Highly palatable
- Easy to chew and swallow
- Clean and dust free
- Contain 12-16% protein
- Include adequate amounts of high quality fiber
- Contain essential minerals including calcium and phosphorus in the proper ratio
- Include all essential vitamins, especially C and B-complex vitamins

• Provide enough readily available energy to maintain proper body condition

- Contain adequate, palatable fat from a vegetable source

Nutrition is very important, but if your horse can't properly chew his feed it'll do little good. A horse that can chew his feed properly will waste less of it, get more nutrient value from it and be less likely to choke or colic. Have your veterinarian examine and float your horse's teeth at least once a year – twice annually if the horse is over 20.

Many people assume that the kindest thing to do for an

older horse is to turn him out to pasture. However, horses are individuals, some enjoy being idle and others prefer to be a part of the action. Whatever you do, don't abandon your senior horse. Proper nutrition, care and exercise will help him thrive. Keeping in mind the following guidelines, develop a total management plan for your elder horse.

- Provide a safe, comfortable environment with adequate shelter from the elements.
- Arrange for routine dental care.
- Observe your horse on a regular basis. Note changes in body condition, behavior and attitude. Promptly address problems.
- Feed your older horse away from younger, more aggressive ones to keep him from having to fight for his feed.
- For troubled chewers, wet the feed to soften it.
- Feed at more frequent intervals so as not to upset the digestive system.
- Provide plenty of fresh, clean, tepid water.
- Adjust and balance rations to maintain proper body conditions. You want to be able to feel the ribs but not see them.
- Exercise the horse to maintain muscle tone, flexibility, and mobility.
- Deworm at regular intervals.
- Provide regular hoofcare.
- Groom frequently to promote circulation and skin health and to check for any abnormalities such as tumors.
- Provide adequate ventilation, and reduce exposure to dust and allergens.
- Schedule routine checkups with your veterinarian.

-Sarah Gee

References:

Older Horse: Special Care & Nutrition at www.xcodesign.com/aaep/displayArticles.cfm?ID=282
10 Tips for Caring for the Older Horse at www.xcodesign.com/aaep/displayArticles.cfm?ID=198