



## What Do I Need To Know?

After years of faithful service, the older equine deserves diligent, vigilant and thoughtful care. Modern veterinary science and technology have led to improved care for horses and subsequently many are living longer than was previously the case. With proper attention, some horses can work well into their twenties and live happily in retirement for many years after that.

The routine care that all horses require becomes increasingly important for the older horse. This includes farrier visits, dental care, worming, annual vet checks and vaccinations. Additionally, you may need to alter diet, healthcare, rugging and exercise routines as your horse ages. Plenty of fresh grazing, clean water, exercise, company and appropriate shelter will help to keep your horse in top shape.

Some key points to remember include:

- Older equines have specific needs - learn how you can provide the most appropriate care
- You should carefully monitor eating, behaviour and health changes
- Older horses can lose condition quickly. And it takes longer for them to regain it
- Work to reduce physical and emotional stress on your older horse
- Exercise and companionship continue to be important
- Given proper care, no older equine should be in poor condition

In summary, the best care for your horse will depend on their age, health, condition and work load. Prior to adopting or buying an older horse, be realistic about the care and attention you can afford to provide. Also research what euthanasia options are available - you need to be prepared to take action if your horse's quality of life diminishes.

## Feeding & Nutrition

As horses age, their digestive systems become less equipped to be able to break down a diet based on grain and starches. In turn, this can mean they are unable to derive the nutrition they need from their feed and assimilate vitamins, minerals, phosphorus and protein effectively. The condition of a horse's teeth and ability to graze will also determine how readily they assimilate nutrients and what their diet should be. In general, aim for high quality, high energy, high fibre and high protein foods that are easy to chew and digest.

- Pelleted feeds
- Processed grains (eg. flaked, rolled, steamed)
- Boiled barley
- Slow cooked millet
- Oaten chaff
- Soybean meal or hulls
- Sugarbeet pulp
- Feed formulated for older horses, eg.gumnuts

Feed that may be helpful for your older equine include:

If your horse has poor teeth, you may need to feed mash as it can generally be eaten easily. Older horses often retain the ability to digest fat well and this can help maintain body weight. Consider adding fats or oils to their feed: canola, linseed, soybean, or wheat germ some of the options available. Note that horses with liver problems should **not** be fed a high fat diet - consult with your vet.

Ensuring adequate roughage for your older horse is also important. Choose softer, immature hays that will be easier to chew and ensure it is clean and dust free. Provide ample amounts of hay in winter as it will generate more body heat than grain.

Do remember that any changes to diet should be introduced slowly over a number of weeks and small frequent meals may help your horse's digestion. Adequate water intake also needs to be monitored to guard against colic and dehydration.

Other supplements that may be helpful include:

- Vitamins
- Mineral lick
- Probiotics (for digestive issues)
- Garlic
- Rosehips
- Brewer's yeast
- Milk thistle seeds
- Sunflower seeds
- Apple cider vinegar
- Rice bran
- Vitamin C
- Hoof supplements

You may need to separate your older horse from others at feed time, particularly if they suffer from teeth issues or are slow feeders.

## Health

The older equine is more prone to disease and illness and takes longer to recover from it, so monitor your horse's wellbeing closely. They can be predisposed to a range of health issues, including but not limited to:

- Kidney dysfunction
- Liver disorders
- Melanomas and sarcoids
- Arthritis and cartilage wear
- Cushings disease
- Thyroid and pituitary dysfunction
- Brittle bones
- Respiratory issues and/or allergies
- Cataracts and vision issues
- Depressed immune system
- Reduced muscle strength and topline
- Colic
- Choking
- Tendon and joint issues

If your horse suffers from kidney or liver issues, dietary changes will be necessary and you should consult your vet. For example, kidney dysfunction can result in dangerous levels of calcium build-up and necessitate a low calcium diet and liver issues may require reduced protein intake. Liver issues may be indicated by a number of symptoms including but not limited to weight loss, lethargy, loss of appetite, fat and protein intolerance, yawning and head pressing. Symptoms associated with kidney dysfunction can include but are not limited to increased drinking and urination. Kidney and liver issues may limit the drugs that can be used to treat other conditions - always consult your vet.

The onset of arthritis is a common problem which can be alleviated to some extent by the addition of natural supplements to the diet (eg. glucosamine). Veterinary products that can be prescribed by your vet, including painkillers, may also help. Watch carefully for stiffness and lameness, particularly during the cold damp weather that exacerbates the condition. Joints that have previously suffered damage will be particularly prone to arthritis.

Check regularly for melanomas and sarcoids which will require monitoring and possibly treatment - pay particular attention to the eyelids, udder, sheath, dock, legs and belly.

Finally, an annual vet check is an excellent investment and can be scheduled to coincide with annual vaccinations.

## Warning Signs

The following symptoms may indicate that you need to call your vet, dentist or farrier immediately (note that this list is **not** exhaustive).

- Dramatic weight loss
- Behavioural changes
- Changes to vital signs, eg. irregular heartbeat
- Increased urination and/or sweating
- Excessive drinking
- Increase appetite combined with weight loss
- Thick curly coat that does not shed
- Coat in poor condition
- Lethargy
- Depression
- Dropping of feed from the mouth
- Eating with mouth open
- Difficulty chewing
- Holding head sideways
- Discomfort when drinking water
- Bad breath
- Un-chewed hay or excessive grain in manure
- Lumps or bumps
- Changes to appearance of eyes
- Kicking at side (and other colic symptoms)
- Shifting weight on different feet
- Warm hoofs (and other laminitis symptoms)
- Only eating small amounts of hay
- Pain and discomfort

Always consult your vet if you suspect a health issue

## Weight

Aim to keep your horse at a healthy weight regardless as to its age and remember that the older equine can be at risk of being under-weight *or* over-weight.

Excessive weight will exacerbate existing issues such as arthritis and leg or back problems and lead to laminitis. If your horse falls into this category, monitor its weight and pasture closely and have access to a bare paddock or yard to help reduce its weight when required. Any weight loss program should be progressive - it can be dangerous for a horse to lose weight too quickly.

Older horses can lose condition very quickly, and it can take much longer for them to regain it, particularly with the onset of winter. In general, the older horse will require additional feed at least during the winter months.

## Teeth

Routine dental care is essential for older horses. Have the teeth of your horse checked twice annually and additionally call the dentist if you suspect any problems. While teeth continue to grow into old age, the rate of wear tends to outmatch it. As a horse's teeth progressively slope as they age, it also becomes more of a challenge for them to graze and chew. Broken, damaged or loose teeth can become more of an issue, along with sharp edges that can lead to infection and irritation.

## Feet

Regular visits from a farrier continue to be essential for the older equine. Regular trimming of the hooves is required and shoeing may be needed in certain circumstances, for example if your horse has thin soles. Continue to check and pick out your horse's feet daily, even if they are not in regular work. This will give you an opportunity to check the general health of their feet and identify potential issues early. Remember that horses previously not susceptible to laminitis can become so as they age. Proper hoof care can also help reduce stress on arthritic joints.

## Worming

Ensure that you continue to have a regular worming program in place and worm every 6 to 8 weeks. This is particularly important given the challenge of maintaining condition and adequate nutrient absorption for the older horse.

## Rugging

Consistent and appropriate rugging is important as older equines are more readily affected by extremes of heat. Make sure that rugs are removed in warm periods as over-rugging can result in heat stress, weight loss and dehydration. Also ensure your horse is appropriately rugged during colder weather; appropriate rugging in winter will reduce the amount of energy your horse needs to generate heat.

You should also frequently check *under* rugs to assess the condition of your horse given the propensity for older horses to lose condition quickly. Similarly, access to shelter in extremes of weather remains critical.

## Exercise

While older horses continue to need exercise, aim to keep it regular. As a rule, the older equine will be less able to deal with intermittent or weekend-only riding. Spending time to warm up and cool down your horse will also be time well spent. Consider providing supplementary exercise if your horse is not kept on a well sized acreage - options include leading them from another horse, hand leading and gentle natural horsemanship activities. Lunging is often not an option due to the stress it puts on joints. As the older horse loses muscle tone, it may also be necessary to use a different saddle to ensure an appropriate fit.

## Companionship & Contact

The older equine, similar to all horses, requires companionship but ensure they are not the target of bullying by younger horses. If your horse is used to regular work and contact with you, they will still need and want your attention when retired. Make sure you spend quality time with them and continue their grooming routine.

Ongoing handling and catching is also important to make veterinary, farrier and dental visits as easy and stress free as possible. Remember that older horses find change more stressful, including relocation and the introduction of new horses, so plan accordingly.