

The Special Needs Horse

Many of us have a beloved, equine family member who may be facing some health or physical challenges. These are often related to aging. There are many thoughtful, logical ways in which we can make life easier for these horses as long as their quality of life remains positive.



Blindness

The horse who is blind or losing his sight feels so very vulnerable. He must never be startled by a silent approach followed by a touch. We must talk to him in soothing tones and touch him on the neck or shoulder in a direct and comforting manner.

He should be led wearing a halter with lead shank while you keep your hand touching the cheek piece of the halter and his cheek. You should stay by his shoulder. In this way, holding the lead in your other hand, you can direct him with a light, steady pull toward you or gentle push away to have him know to go left or right. If the ground rises, raise his head with the halter and slow him while speaking to him. If the ground drops, stop him and take one slow step at a time so he can keep his footing. You may need to keep a hand on his neck also to support him. You are directing him, not holding him up (we can't do that!), but the comfort of your presence will build confidence.

When grooming or massaging him, *always* keep a hand on his body so he knows where you are (starting at his shoulder). Leave his whiskers and feeler hairs on his face long so he can feel before he bumps his face on fences or trees and the like. Remove objects he could stumble over, bump into or fall onto. Wrap pipe fences with spongy insulating foam to cushion a bump.

LOOK where you are leading him! Never leave a long lead shank and walk away from him, allowing him to "float" out on his own. He will think you are still guiding him and could have a bad accident. Think ahead and prevent trouble.

Laminitis/Founder – a disorder of the hooves

The horse who has foundered starts out with a lot of pain and, even when healing well, will be tender in his hooves for a long time. It is imperative that the coffin bone is supported and there are many pads available for use inside of boots or to be taped on the bottom of the hooves. The goal is to reduce concussion, support the coffin bone that is inside the hoof itself and work to get the layers of hoof wall to reconnect and grow out a “normal” hoof again.

The foundered or Laminitic horse should be led on straight lines with huge curves to turn around - any stepping sideways can be *extremely* painful as the hoof wall is not properly holding the bones inside the hoof in alignment. Exercise is vital to healing, but sharp turns and stepping on stones, ditches or uneven ground will HURT.

Therapy includes diet details, supplementation to maintain good circulation and many methods to restore the energy flow in the legs and encourage restructuring of the hoof capsule. Hard ground, rough or uneven footing and going downhill can all be torturous for the foundered horse! Protect him as he heals.

The Horse with back issues

This horse can have trouble moving in small spaces, getting up and down, urinating or reaching down with his neck to eat or drink. Obviously, large paddocks with soft bedding are necessary. Containers for feed and for water should be elevated.

Professional Chiropractic and Massage work can help with mobility and Phytotherapy (healing with plants) can assist with pain management. Herbs like White Willow Bark, Meadowsweet, Devil’s Claw and Turmeric are anti-inflammatory and analgesic. An Equine Herbalist can help with which herbs to choose.

If the horse can be “worked” in-hand for gentle exercise (always promoting circulation of blood and lymph); rear end, loins and hip problems are helped by walking “shoulder-in” while neck, wither and mid-back problems benefit from

“haunches-in” at the walk for short periods of time. A spasm in the back needs to walk straight forward immediately.

With all “special needs” horses, common sense can serve us well. We must stay alert to avoid being accidentally injured by a horse moving in an unpredictable way. If you are not experienced with horses, get help with any horse experiencing troubles with perception or coordination. Always consult with a health care practitioner for medications and therapy plans.

Case Studies

At the Sanctuary, we have worked with dozens of Special Needs horses; Katharine has worked with hundreds. We stay flexible and willing to try anything that will **do no harm in** our quest to improve equine lives. And we will assist the passing (euthanize humanely) of any horse whose quality of life cannot be maintained.

We had a mare, **Penny**, who tore the tendons in her front leg; not just once but 3 times (she recovered twice, but after the third episode, we could not let her suffer any longer). From various forms of Body Work to help her (Chiropractic, Massage and Reiki), to special shoeing (we are advocates of barefoot for horses and all of the horses in Sanctuary are barefooted; but we use whatever we need to help a horse in the moment!), we worked hard to heal her and gave her more years of joy after her injury.



Damaru came to us starved, foundered, with scars and injuries that were consistent with “horse tripping”, a rodeo type event that horses rarely survive. While we did have to let her pass peacefully after a long time of healing and cherishing her (she was in her late 30’s), spending the time to give her comfort and love was important.

She was barefooted and wore “Soft Ride” special hoof boots that made it possible for her to walk and trot comfortably. We filled her pen with “pea gravel” to add a surface with flexibility to help her hooves.



Vega is a gelding with us who is in his 40's. He came to us at age 35 years and was going to be killed because he was "too old". He is the healthiest of horses! Having been an Eventer (Dressage and Jumping athlete), obviously well cared for in his youth, his only special need was his total lack of teeth for chewing!

So, we grind alfalfa hay with an ancient attachment on the tractor; then soak it in water before each meal. He has thrived with this care and diet to which we add Calf Manna (the only composite feed we ever use), herbs, wheat bran mashes with linseed meal well soaked and finely chopped fresh fruits and veggies for the enzymes.

In the beginning, we were soaking Timothy hay pellets and alfalfa pellets for him. The expense was high and, being a Sanctuary for many horses, we had to figure a way to keep him thriving, but stay frugal. Chopping the hay is perfect.





Lung Ta has scars on his eyes. He also has a broken jaw from his youth. We keep him wearing a thin, black fly mask that protects his eyes from the glare of the sun. He is ridden at noon when the shadows are minimized and is only ridden in a halter or a bitless bridle. He's an Irish Draft horse. We are constantly aware of his compromised eyesight. He's a Gentle Giant, in Sanctuary at Dharmahorse because he was on his way to slaughter – a friend saved him!

