



Caring for Your Aging Equine

As horses age, they experience changes that require specific care and attention to ensure they maintain a good quality of life. An aging horse may face challenges such as reduced mobility, slower recovery times, and age-related health conditions. However, with the right approach, proper management, and regular veterinary care, you can help your older horse stay comfortable, healthy, and active well into their senior years. This manual provides guidance on how to care for your aging horse, including nutrition, exercise, health management, and overall well-being.

1. Regular Veterinary Check-ups

Why It's Important: Regular veterinary check-ups are essential for aging horses to detect and manage age-related health issues early. Senior horses are more prone to conditions like arthritis, dental problems, colic, metabolic disorders, and cardiovascular issues. Routine exams help identify any emerging concerns and allow for timely treatment.

What to Expect: Senior horses should see the vet at least twice a year for thorough health evaluations. Your vet will assess your horse's weight, joint health, heart and lung function, and overall well-being. Blood work may be recommended to check for metabolic or organ-related issues, such as kidney function or insulin resistance. If any health problems are detected, your vet can create a management plan tailored to your horse's needs.

2. Nutrition and Diet

Why It's Important: As horses age, their nutritional needs change. Older horses may have reduced digestion efficiency or may develop health conditions that require special diets. Proper nutrition is essential for maintaining energy, muscle mass, and joint health, while also preventing obesity and weight loss.

What to Feed:

- **High-Quality Forage:** Ensure your senior horse has access to high-quality hay or pasture that is rich in fiber. Older horses may need softer hay if they have dental issues, and soaking hay can help with digestion. If your aging equine is missing several teeth at this age, chopped hay or soaked hay pellets are safe options for hay replacement.
- **Senior Horse Feed:** Look for specially formulated senior horse feeds that are easy to digest and rich in essential nutrients. These feeds often contain higher fiber content, added vitamins and minerals, and may be designed for horses with dental or metabolic

issues. Remember to soak feed to make the eating process easier. This will help prevent choke in your elderly equine

- **Supplements:** Depending on your horse's health needs, you may want to add supplements such as joint support (glucosamine, chondroitin), omega-3 fatty acids (for coat and skin health), or vitamins like B12 or Vitamin E to support muscle health.

Hydration: Older horses may have a decreased thirst drive, so it's important to monitor their water intake. Consider adding wet feed or offering fresh water more frequently to encourage hydration.

3. Dental Care

Why It's Important: Dental issues are common in older horses, as their teeth naturally wear down over time. Improperly worn teeth can lead to difficulty chewing, malnutrition, weight loss, and painful infections. Regular dental check-ups are critical to maintaining your horse's ability to eat and absorb nutrients.

What to Do:

- **Routine Dental Exams:** Have your vet or an equine dentist check your horse's teeth at least once a year, and more frequently if they show signs of dental problems (difficulty eating, drooling, weight loss).
- **Floating:** If your horse has sharp points or overgrown teeth, your vet may perform a procedure called "floating" to file down uneven teeth and improve their chewing ability.
- **Soft Feed:** If your horse has trouble chewing due to dental problems, you may need to switch to softer, chopped hay or even wet feed.

4. Joint Care and Mobility

Why It's Important: Older horses are more susceptible to joint issues like arthritis, which can cause pain and reduce mobility. Joint pain can interfere with your horse's ability to move comfortably and may affect their performance in activities.

What to Do:

- **Joint Supplements:** Consider adding joint supplements containing glucosamine, chondroitin, and hyaluronic acid to help support your horse's joints and reduce inflammation.
- **Exercise:** Maintain a regular exercise routine to keep your horse's muscles strong and joints flexible. Low-impact activities like walking or light trotting are ideal for older horses. Avoid high-impact activities that could strain their joints.
- **Comfortable Living Space:** Ensure your horse has access to a soft, dry surface for resting. Older horses may be more susceptible to pressure sores, so bedding should be soft and supportive.

5. Exercise and Activity

Why It's Important: Regular exercise is crucial for maintaining your aging horse's overall health. However, as your horse ages, you may need to adjust the intensity and duration of their workouts. Regular but gentle exercise helps maintain muscle mass, improves circulation, and keeps the joints flexible.

What to Do:

- **Modify Exercise:** Reduce the intensity and duration of exercise for an older horse. Light trail riding, slow trotting, or even groundwork can provide adequate physical activity without overstressing their body.
- **Stretching:** Incorporate stretching or gentle massage into your horse's routine to improve flexibility and relieve stiffness in their muscles and joints.
- **Monitor for Fatigue:** Pay attention to signs of fatigue, excessive sweating, or lameness after exercise. These could be signs that your horse is overexerting themselves and may need rest or adjustment to their exercise routine.

6. Grooming and Coat Care

Why It's Important: As horses age, their coat may become thinner, coarser, or drier. Grooming not only keeps your horse looking good, but it also provides an opportunity to check for lumps, bumps, or signs of skin issues. Additionally, older horses may need help with shedding or may develop skin conditions that require special care.

What to Do:

- **Regular Grooming:** Brush your horse regularly to remove dirt, debris, and loose hair. This will help keep their skin healthy and stimulate blood circulation.
- **Bathing:** Older horses may not sweat as efficiently as younger horses, and they may need help staying clean. Bathing can also help with managing dry, flaky skin.
- **Skin Health:** Be on the lookout for any changes in your horse's coat, such as bald patches, dry skin, or unusual lumps that could indicate a health concern.

7. Weight Management

Why It's Important: Maintaining a healthy weight is critical for older horses. Obesity can strain joints and increase the risk of developing conditions like laminitis, while underweight horses may struggle to get the nutrients they need for optimal health.

What to Do:

- **Monitor Weight:** Regularly check your horse's body condition and make adjustments to their feed if needed. Older horses may require more frequent monitoring since their metabolism may change as they age.
- **Avoid Overfeeding:** Be careful not to overfeed older horses, especially those with reduced activity levels. Use slow feeders or limit access to high-calorie forage to prevent weight gain.

8. Monitor Behavior and Mental Health

Why It's Important: Aging horses may develop cognitive issues, such as confusion, disorientation, or anxiety. It's important to recognize changes in behavior early to address potential mental health concerns.

What to Do:

- **Consistency:** Keep your horse's routine consistent, as changes in environment or routine can cause stress and confusion.
- **Enrichment:** Provide mental stimulation through activities like grooming, light exercise, or social interactions with other horses.
- **Monitor Behavior:** Watch for signs of cognitive dysfunction, such as pacing, increased anxiety, or difficulty recognizing familiar people or places. Consult your vet if you notice these changes.

9. Comfort and Living Space

Why It's Important: Older horses may be more sensitive to temperature changes, and their living environment plays a crucial role in their comfort and overall well-being.

What to Do:

- **Shelter:** Provide shelter from extreme weather conditions, such as hot sun or cold wind. Older horses may be less resilient to environmental stressors.
- **Soft Bedding:** Ensure your horse has a soft, supportive place to rest. Consider using extra bedding or softer materials to reduce pressure on their joints.
- **Safety:** Ensure that your horse's living area is safe, with smooth ground and minimal obstacles that could cause injury.

Caring for your aging horse requires thoughtful management and attention to their changing needs. By maintaining regular veterinary check-ups, providing proper nutrition, supporting joint health, and adjusting their exercise and grooming routine, you can help your senior horse remain comfortable, healthy, and active in their golden years. Remember, every horse is unique, so it's essential to tailor their care based on their individual health and needs to ensure they live out their senior years in comfort.