

Caring for the Senior Horse

Horses, like people, experience deterioration of all of their body systems as they age. Symptoms that we commonly see include weight loss, difficulty eating, and arthritis. The immune function of old horses is not as good as it is in younger animals. Thus, they are predisposed to disease that might not affect an animal in the prime of life.

Dental disease and inefficient processing of feed is the most common reason for weight loss. Dental problems are common in old horses and are often responsible for difficulty chewing feed and resulting weight loss. Horse's permanent teeth are a set length. They do not grow but are gradually worn off as they grind against opposing teeth and abrasive feeds. With time, the root of the tooth (known as the reserve crown) moves down through the bone of the jaw and becomes closer and closer to the gum. A 6 year old horse might have a 3-4" long molar, deeply embedded in bone. A 22 year old might have a tooth that is only 1-2" long and barely rooted at all. These teeth are predisposed to periodontal disease, pockets of feed and infection around the teeth, which lead to a variety of problems. Often these teeth become loose and may need to be extracted. Poor dental function also predisposes old horses to "choke" or esophageal obstruction. Incompletely chewed feed becomes impacted in the esophagus and often requires veterinary attention.

The efficiency of gut function decreases with age. Older horses do not have the same ability to digest and absorb feed that younger horses have. This is in large part related to decreasing processing of feed by the teeth. Having well processed, ground feed is critical to the function of the digestive tract. The organisms that break down plant fiber are much more efficient when the particles of feed are small. Large particles are incompletely utilized and much is just passed through in the manure. For these reasons, attention to nutrition, management and dental care are critical aspects of caring for old horses.

Regarding management and care, there are now many pelleted "senior feeds" that are balanced and easily digestible nutrition for the older horse. Many of these commercial feeds provide everything senior horse needs. As a horse owner, it is important to be aware of these feeds and ask your veterinarian how incorporating these feeds into your horse's regimen can help his quality of life. Ensure that older horses kept in groups can get to their feed. Horses develop a hierarchy where more dominant animals eat more and can prevent less-dominant horses from getting adequate nutrition. In situations where geriatric horses aren't able to compete for feed, consider feeding them separately.

Old horses benefit from consistent moderate exercise in the form of pasture turnout or regular light to moderate work. This is, of course, provided that they are not in pain. Chronic pain is a major problem for old horses, as it is for old people. Arthritis is the most common source of pain. This usually is chronic and often multiple joints. Proper

diagnosis and treatment of this pain also improves the quality of life for horses. Chronic pain can also play a role in weight loss.

Vaccination and de-worming remains an important part of preventative medicine. A well-designed vaccination and parasite control program are also essential since senior horses are very susceptible to diseases and parasites.

In many old horses, there is a combination of many of these factors that contribute to a poor quality of life. When we address these underlying factors, we can really improve their lives. As with most veterinary problems, good preventative care is better than being forced to treat these problems once they occur. Good care through the early and middle years helps prevent many problems and sets an old horse up to have a healthy and comfortable retirement.