



AAEP American Association
of Equine Practitioners

Horse Health Education

OLDER HORSE

Special Care and Nutrition

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HORSE HEALTH EDUCATION: OLDER HORSE

Due to improvements in nutrition, management and health care, horses are living longer, more productive lives.

It's not uncommon to find horses and ponies living well into their 20s and even 30s.

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While genetics play a determining role in longevity, you too can have an impact. By providing proper care and nutrition, you can help make your horse's golden years happier and more productive.



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THE AGING PROCESS

Time does take its toll on many of the body's systems. Possible effects may include:

- The horse's digestive tract may not be as efficient as it once was.
- Bones and joints are less resilient.
- An elderly horse may feel the aches and pains of arthritis.
- The immune system is less reliable, making older horses more susceptible to illness and slower to recover from both disease and injury.

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THE AGING PROCESS



- Parasite infestations may also take a heavy toll.
- Aged horses are more prone to respiratory, eye and dental problems.
- Elderly horses are also less able to cope with environmental stresses such as wind, wet and cold.

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THE AGING PROCESS

Hormonal changes may affect overall body condition, hair growth, appetite and energy levels.

While some signs of decline may be directly related to the aging process, others may have an underlying medical problem. Be sure to consult with your veterinarian.



Hirsutism (long curly haircoat) is a common sign of Cushing's disease.

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SPECIAL NUTRITIONAL NEEDS

While every facet of horse health care is important, proper nutrition is vital.



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SPECIAL NUTRITIONAL NEEDS

As horses age, their digestive systems become less efficient. Hormonal and metabolic changes affect or interfere with their ability to digest, absorb and utilize essential nutrients in their feed, especially protein, phosphorous and fiber.

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SPECIAL NUTRITIONAL NEEDS

Many older horses benefit from complete rations with built-in roughage that are specially formulated to compensate for changes in their digestive physiology.



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SPECIAL NUTRITIONAL NEEDS

When selecting feeds, evaluate your choices by the following criteria. The senior diet should be:

- Highly palatable.
- Easy to chew and swallow.
- Clean and dust-free to prevent or lessen the impact of allergies or lung disease.
- Provide 12-14% protein.

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SPECIAL NUTRITIONAL NEEDS

- Contain enough high-quality fiber to aid digestion.
- Provide essential minerals, including calcium and phosphorus in the proper ratio.
- Include all essential vitamins, especially vitamin C and B-complex vitamins.

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SPECIAL NUTRITIONAL NEEDS

- Provide readily available energy to maintain proper body condition.
- Include adequate, palatable fat from a vegetable source to promote healthy skin and hair, aid digestion and boost energy intake.

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DENTAL CARE

A horse that can chew its feed properly will waste less of it, get more nutrient value from it, and be less likely to choke or colic.



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DENTAL CARE

Have your veterinarian examine and “float” (file) your horse’s teeth at least once a year – twice annually if your horse is over 20 years old.



Front view of 20-year-old horse



Side view of 20-year-old horse

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DENTAL CARE

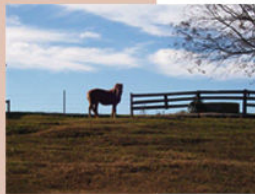
Annual or bi-annual dental care will keep your horse's nipping and grinding surfaces in good working order. It also gives the veterinarian a chance to troubleshoot for broken or lost teeth and check for tongue, gum or other possible dental problems.

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A TOTAL MANAGEMENT PLAN



You may think that turning your old-timer out to pasture is the kindest form of retirement; however, horses are individuals.

Some enjoy being idle while others prefer to be part of the action.

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A TOTAL MANAGEMENT PLAN



Proper nutrition, care and exercise will help your horse thrive. Develop a total management plan for your senior citizen and keep in mind the following guidelines:

- Provide a safe, comfortable environment, free of hazards and with adequate shelter from wind, rain, snow and biting insects.

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A TOTAL MANAGEMENT PLAN

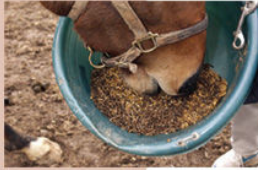
- Arrange for routine dental care to keep the teeth and mouth in good working order; at least once per year is recommended.
- Observe your horse on a regular basis. Watch for changes in body conditions, behavior and attitude. Address problems - even seemingly minor ones - right away.
- Feed a high-quality diet. Avoid dusty and moldy feeds.

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A TOTAL MANAGEMENT PLAN



- Feed your older horse away from younger, more aggressive ones so the need to compete for feed is eliminated.
- For troubled chewers, wet the feed to soften it, or add enough water to make a “mash” – a thick, soup-like ration that the horse can drink.
- Feed at more frequent intervals, as not to upset the digestive system; 2-3 times daily is best.

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A TOTAL MANAGEMENT PLAN



- Provide plenty of fresh, clean, tepid water. Excessively cold water reduces consumption, which can lead to colic and other problems.
- Adjust and balance rations to maintain proper body conditions. A good rule-of-thumb is to be able to feel the ribs but not see them.
- Provide adequate, appropriate exercise to maintain muscle tone, flexibility and mobility.

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A TOTAL MANAGEMENT PLAN



- Be vigilant in controlling pests and parasites. Deworm at regular intervals.
- Manage pastures and facilities to reduce infestations.
- Provide regular hoof care. Your farrier should trim or shoe the horse whether or not you ride to maintain proper hoof shape and movement. This will help prevent lameness and injuries.

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A TOTAL MANAGEMENT PLAN



- Groom your horse frequently to promote circulation and skin health.
- Be aware that older horses are prone to tumors. Look for any unusual lumps or growths from head to tail as well as beneath the tail (especially in gray horses).

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A TOTAL MANAGEMENT PLAN

- Provide adequate ventilation in barns. Keep pastures mowed and weed-free to reduce allergens. Reduce dust in paddocks as much as possible to prevent respiratory distress.
- Schedule routine checkups with your veterinarian. Call immediately if you suspect a problem.



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HEALTH AND CARE PARTNERSHIP

While there is much you can do to keep your older horse healthy and spry, some conditions associated with aging require medical intervention.

Your equine veterinarian can identify and treat such things as tumors, hormone imbalances, renal disease, Cushing's syndrome, arthritis, reproductive problems and other maladies.

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HEALTH AND CARE PARTNERSHIP



Older horses are at greater risk of developing laminitis (founder), so proper nutrition is essential.

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HEALTH AND CARE PARTNERSHIP



Schedule regular check-ups and keep a good line of communication with your veterinarian.

A quick response to ailments, injuries or a decline in fitness can keep your older horse from having a serious or prolonged setback.

That means less worry for you and a better quality of life for your old friend.

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Photographs Courtesy of:

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