

TAKING CARE OF THE OLDER HORSE



Because of advances in nutrition, management and health care horses can live well into their 20's and even 30's, although genetics and life-long care play an important role in their lifespan. Senior horses can remain active and useful equine companions for many years past their "prime". They require a little more care and attention to live well and stay in shape, but keeping a careful eye on your senior citizen will benefit him greatly. Older horses can be excellent schoolmasters, pasture companions and even brood mares. Our old faithful horses deserve to have a dignified and comfortable retirement.

In order to keep the older horse fit and happy there are several key points to consider.

Shoeing

- Provide regular hoof care whether you are riding the horse or not.
- Maintain correct angles, movement and hoof shape.
- Check for thrush or deterioration of the foot as older horses hooves can become brittle or grow less than a younger horses.

Dental Care

- With age, the horses teeth will experience extreme changes in size, shape, angles and wear. The older horse will quite often lose teeth causing them extra trouble eating.
- The changes may lead to an inability to chew adequately, dropping of feed or gulping of food. These changes can cause a failure to thrive, colic and other problems.
- Have your vet check the teeth regularly, at least once a year or better yet twice a year.
- Check for Gum Disease often.

Grooming

- Groom regularly to promote circulation, skin health and ensure cleanliness.
- While doing a thorough grooming, do a physical check for cuts, bumps or any changes.
- In the spring the older horse requires extra effort to remove the winter coat.
- While grooming take the time to note changes in body condition, behaviour and attitude and address them.
- Consider blanketing the horse in the winter and during the rainy season.
- Provide protection against flies in the summer.

Exercise

- Be sure to provide adequate exercise to maintain muscle tone, flexibility and mobility. The type and duration will depend upon the horses age and condition.
- Exercise can be riding, lungeing or turnout.
- As the horse ages more or shows signs of distress or fatigue, the exercise program should be re-evaluated.

Feeding

- As the horse ages his nutritional needs change. Adjust his feed schedule and portions as needed.
- Feed less more often.
- You should be able to feel but not see his ribs.
- Always remove uneaten food from the stall or feeder.
- Tempt with treats if the horse has a decreased appetite.
- Check your feed dealer for information on special feeds for older horses.
- Do not make sudden changes in feed or schedules.
- Feed away from other horses, so they do not have to compete for food and allow more time for the older horse to finish his meal.
- Older horse can benefit from feeding fat (oil) as the condition of their teeth begins to wane, easily digested fat can help prevent loss of condition.
- Make sure that he is drinking enough water.
- Consult with your vet if you are unsure of your feeding regime.

Veterinary Care

- Have regular veterinary exams.
- Maintain a regular diligent worming program.
- Check for tumours in older horses, especially greys.
- Older horse can be prone to colic, so be extra careful in your prevention regime.
- Keep all vaccinations up to date.
- Discuss with your Vet all the possible health problems that can affect older horses, such as lipomas, Cushings Disease, Blindness, Arthritis and respiratory ailments. Be sure to understand them and be able to recognize some of the symptoms. If you suspect your horse may be ill, call your vet.
- Keep note of the horses regular Temperature, Pulse and Respiration for comparison.

Stabling

- Provide adequate shelter at all times.
- In the stall provide deep, warm bedding so the horse can lie down comfortably. Hard surfaces are bad for horses with arthritic changes.
- Use bedding that won't tangle around the horses feet.
- Keep the stall and turnout area clean.
- If the older horse is turned out with other younger horses, make sure that he is not too stressed by their activity.
- Provide run in shelters if possible in fields or paddocks.
- Turn out should be safe and well fenced.
- Try to turn the horse out daily.

When the Time Comes...

- Try to make your decisions about euthanasia before it is time to act.
- Consult your vet as to options and procedures.
- You may want to consider euthanasia when the horse is in constant pain, has debilitating weight loss, or suffers a fatal injury or illness.
- However hard for you, this is the kindest and most important decision you can make for your horse.

Suggested Reading

- The Older Horse, by Robert Holland, DVM, PHD
- The Older Horse, Guide to Conditioning, by Eleanor Kellon, VMD
- Keeping the Older Horse Young, by Eleanor Kellon, VMD