

Feeding the Older Horse

As is the case in the human world, advances in medicine and nutrition means that our equine friends are now also living longer than ever before. These senior citizens of the horse world have special needs (again, just like our own aging population), and it is imperative that we pay particular attention to them to ensure their later years are enjoyable for them.

Possibly the single biggest issue for the older horse is nutrition. The ability to effectively chew their feed is largely dependant on the condition of their teeth, and then, to double the problem, the digestive efficiency of older horses (15yo plus) is also decreased. That is, their ability to absorb nutrients as well as digest fibre is lessened, in some cases up to 20% less. So, the older horse often requires more feed (or a more digestible feed) to simply maintain their body condition.

Having their teeth seen to by a veterinarian or qualified equine dentist twice a year is an essential aspect of the care and maintenance of the older horse. Worn teeth can cause painful lacerations to the inside of the mouth, making chewing a very unpleasant experience. In other case, deteriorating teeth can make grazing difficult (due to an inability to actually tear of grass from the ground), whilst in some cases, feed will actually fall from the horse's mouth as it is chewing.

The choice on what type of feed is provided to the older horse is also crucial. Raw grains such as oats, corn and barley are generally unsuitable for two reasons; firstly they are quite hard and therefore difficult to chew and secondly, due to the decreased efficiency of the digestive tract, they can sometimes simply pass straight through the horse.

A good quality pellet such as the Horsepower Equestrian can be a great product for the older horse, with the pellet itself being easy to chew (even easier if made into a mash), and the excellent mineral and trace element levels providing an excellent nutritional base. However, with older horse sometimes having trouble retaining protein, an increase in dietary protein intake maybe be required, but this can be done by simply adding up to 0.5kg of tick or sunflower beans. Horsepower produces a high protein pellet called Spellets, developed initially for brood mares and young growing horses. The inclusion of half a kilo per day in the diet of older skinny horses can produce dramatic improvements by providing high quality easily assimilated protein.

Another fantastic product for the older horse is the Horsepower Mineral Plus Blocks. Having been specifically formulated for horses, these blocks are softer than many of the generic animal licks on the market that have been manufactured mainly for cattle. With a much "rougher" tongue, cattle blocks are often made to a much harder formulation, whereas the Horsepower Minerals Plus Blocks are based on the softer, smoother equine tongue – meaning that an older horse can "lick" the nutrients.

The ability to synthesise certain vitamins may be diminished in senior horses. In particular, B group vitamins and Vitamin C can be affected. Research points towards the decrease in gut microflora that limits the older horses ability to manufacture B Vitamins, whilst the lack of Vitamin C is another common problem that often seen in. The big risk with low levels of Vitamin C is increased susceptibility to viruses. Supplementing the older horses diet with a product such as Horsepower's Vitamin Supplement can be beneficial.

Management of the older horse's environment is also crucial in maximising their feeding program. If your old mate is paddocked with other horses, be particularly vigilant in making sure that younger horses aren't bullying him away from his feed. While some old horses have mastered the art of maintaining a strong presence in the pecking order, many others become very mellow and are seen as easy targets by younger, more aggressive types. If necessary, you may have to isolate the older horse at feed time, to allow him to eat in peace.

Extremes in weather are also felt much more as our horses advance in years (again, just like us!). In the cold of winter, a rug and adequate shelter are very important, and equally so in the summer, when adequate shade is just as essential.

In summary, taking care of the older horse requires some extra care and attention to detail. Make sure you do all you can to make the twilight years for your horse as pleasurable as possible.