



Guiding You Through the Care of Your Senior Equine

What a journey, you were able to see your child show her horse for the past 10 years and now she has left for college. Perhaps your thirteen year old gelding that has been “thirteen” for the past 8 years is now old enough to enjoy a cold brew at the New Belgium. Whichever situation you find yourself in; there are important management decisions that will need to be made to ensure your equine friend will stay happy and healthy for years to come.

Because of advances in nutrition, management and health care, horses are living longer, more useful lives. It's not uncommon to find horses and ponies living well into their 20's and 30's. While genetics play a role in determining life span, you too, can have an impact. You may think that turning your old-timer out to pasture is the kindest form of retirement, but horses are individuals. Some enjoy being idle while others prefer to be a part of the action in a boarding facility. Whatever you do, don't ignore the horse. Proper nutrition, care and exercise will help your animal thrive.

It is common to have concerns about the care for a senior horse, especially during the winter months. Do I need to feed him anything different? How often should I have you check her teeth? How do I keep my retired dressage gelding comfortable into his later 20's?

Observe your horse on a regular basis. Whether he is “collecting his pension” in the back forty or you only see him on the weekend, watch for changes in body condition, behavior and attitude. Address problems, even seemingly minor ones, right away. Simple weight loss or a poor hair coat can lead to more serious problems if left untreated. Routine examinations, vaccination, routine deworming, dental care, and farrier visits are integral components of horse ownership and can potentially minimize the development of feeding related issues as horses' age.

Feeding the older horse is probably the most important aspect of equine geriatric health care. A high quality diet that is void of dusty and moldy feeds is paramount. Feeding smaller meals at more frequent intervals will help keep the digestive system moving away from a veterinary emergency. There are a tremendous variety of “senior” feeds available on the market designed for geriatric horses (and others with dental or digestive problems), but it is important for owners to understand what is in these feeds. Additionally, all horses should be offered free-choice water and a plain white salt block. During the times of deep snow, some older horses may not want to walk to far from the food for his water source; therefore keeping the water close to the hay might help reduce chances of dehydration. Not all horses require a red (mineral) block or extra nutritional supplements. Finally, judge horses' body condition frequently to assess and adjust the amount of feed you offer your horse to maintain an ideal body weight.

Equine dental care has recently evolved from the use of hand floats to the current practice of motorized instruments with the ability to radiograph compromised teeth in the field and perform endodontics for your horse. Given that, we are now seeing many horses outlive their teeth. Because equine teeth are pushed out of the gum as they are worn down, at some point horses can simply “run out” of tooth. Just being able to properly tear off and chew grass and hay can be a challenge. For horses with missing or worn teeth, consider feeding forage cubes, chopped hay products, soaked hay, or pelleted senior feeds



with warm water to make a soupy mash. You can also do this with complete feeds (those in which the forage portion of the diet is included).

If a horse is to be content into his advanced years, he needs to be given the opportunity to keep his body and mind active. The goal of physical activity with the older horse is not athleticism, but simply to maintain body condition and to prevent increasing stiffness. He does not need the same challenges as the young athlete, but he does need regular activity. Older individuals are not able to improve their strength and endurance capacity to the same extent as younger horses. Older horses, just like older humans, feel the aches and pains of aging. The wear and tear of an earlier career might have left overuse injuries that result in arthritis and thickened, inflexible tendons and ligaments. This natural part of aging does not mean that an older horse's days of usefulness as a companion are over. The older horse needs exercise that is consistent and fun, but not necessarily athletically challenging.

Whether he walks the trail, packs the grandchildren, babysits weanlings, carries therapeutic riding program participants, or lives out his years in leisure, the senior horse deserves this ultimate reward: a quality life to enjoy.