



Horses are living longer mainly due to their evolution from working animals to pleasure animals and advances in equine medicine. As the horse gets older various physiological changes occur that require careful management.

When is a horse considered to be old or 'geriatric'?

When a horse reaches 20 years of age, it is considered to be 'geriatric'. Many horses are still physically fit when they reach this age. It is, therefore, probably better to evaluate a horse's physical fitness rather than relying on age by years. Some horses approach their teens and early 20s with no signs of ageing, some however show signs of ageing which slow them down.

The ageing process may involve problems such as an inefficient digestive tract; less resilient bones and joints, aches and pains, eg arthritis; less reliable immune system - older horses are more susceptible to illness and are slow to recover from disease and injury; recurrent parasite infestations and accumulated damage from low grade, long-term worm burdens; respiratory, eye and mouth infections; inability to cope with environmental changes; hormonal changes affecting overall body condition, hair growth, appetite, energy levels, etc.

Why and when should I change my ageing horse's diet?

As your horse reaches old age various physiological changes will take place, including arthritis-related lameness, dental decay/complete loss of teeth, grey hair around eyes, forehead and ears, loss of appetite, loss of condition, loss of vigour, prominent withers and weight loss.

Less obvious changes resulting in problems with general health, include decreased intestinal motility, digestive disorders, eg chronic colic, kidney failure, liver damage, pituitary/thyroid dysfunction, raised blood sugar, respiratory distress.

As these changes occur dietary management becomes essential in maintaining good condition and general health. Dental care and nutritional needs should be the first issues to be addressed. As soon as you notice that your horse is losing condition the first thing you should do is call the vet and ask him to check your horse's teeth and check for kidney or liver problems.

What happens if my horse has dental problems?

If dental problems are not addressed it is likely that no matter how good your horse's diet is, your horse's condition will slowly deteriorate, due to the inability to chew and eat properly. Dental problems are easily resolvable, usually by routine rasping or tooth removal. A horse can still work and eat even if it doesn't have any teeth at all!

Choose hay that is still fairly soft/chopped hay/hay cubes or pellets (these can be soaked for a couple of hours before feeding to make gruel)/soaked beet pulp (good source of calcium). All of these are much easier for your horse to chew and digest.

What happens if my horse suffers from either liver or kidney failure?

If your horse suffers from liver problems the diet should be low in fats, oils and protein. Straight cereals provide carbohydrates that will provide energy for maintenance, weight gain or work. It is important that essential amino acids are supplied to meet the horse's basic requirements. A source of vitamins and minerals should also be provided to counteract the low levels in cereals. Vitamins B and C are also deficient in horses with liver problems.

If your horse suffers from kidney problems avoid feeding excessive levels of calcium and phosphorus. A low protein diet should be fed. Avoid alfalfa and sugarbeet (which are high in calcium) and wheatbran (which is high in phosphorus).

My horse's general health is good, so what kind of diet should I feed?

Once your horse's general health has been assessed and dental, liver and kidney problems are ruled out you can start to think about how you can change the diet to compensate the changes your horse is going

Feeding the older horse



through as he ages. Any dietary changes should be introduced gradually, as quick changes in the diet will result in disruption of the digestive system. Ideally the diet should be altered before a decline in health occurs, delaying dietary change will lead to difficulty in managing any subsequent problems.

With age the gastrointestinal tract becomes less efficient, leading to the inability to process and extract nutrients from the feed, reduced absorption of nutrients and poor digestion. When creating a new diet for your horse you should consider providing feed that is highly palatable, easy to chew and swallow - grains are good for maintaining condition, however, pelleted or extruded (pre-chewed) types are recommended because whole grains are hard to chew and digest, clean and dust-free, provides essential minerals, including calcium and phosphorus - they should be provided at least a 1:1 ratio, provides essential vitamins, especially B (usually produced in large quantities) and C (essential for immune function).

Phosphorus absorption decreases with old age which is essential for bone strength and resilience, the diet should include 0.3-0.4%. Phosphorus can be obtained from various commercial 'Senior' feeds that are designed to meet the specific needs of older horses.

Cooked cereal meals are available which can be made into mashes that are easier to chew, reducing the risk of choke.

Improving digestibility of nutrients can be maximised by feeding extruded or micronised (pre-cooked) feeds. Older horses are unable to digest fibre, ie hay, properly. The provision of an alternative, ie softer, less mature mixed hay with quite high legume content, is preferable. Horses are also unable to absorb protein as efficiently, the diet should include at least 12-16%, which is essential for the repair of bones and soft tissue. Supplementation, eg in the form of Soyabean meal, is required, especially if the quality of the hay that is being fed is poor.

A typical ration should include:

Good quality hay/grass or alfalfa mix

Pellets/extruded feeds designed for geriatric horses - 'Senior' feeds

Water

Salt

What other factors may affect my ageing horse?

Old horses tend to suffer more in the cold weather. They will use up more energy to keep warm, therefore more energy will need to be supplied in the diet.

Feeds with added fat are good for the older horse, except those with liver dysfunction, feeding vegetable oils or rice bran are a good way of increasing calorie density of the diet without increasing its volume. If rice bran is fed, choose a brand that includes added calcium to compensate for the high phosphorus content.

Cold weather also leads to reduced water intake in the older horse, supplying warm or tepid water is likely to encourage your horse to drink. If this doesn't work, try feeding water-soaked feeds or mashes which will increase the fluid intake. Adding salt to the diet is an alternative, but should only be fed if the horse has unlimited access to water.

If you want any other information on health issues concerning your horse please contact Dalehead Veterinary Group on (01729) 823538 and we will be happy to advise you.