

Elder Equine Care

Don't overlook dental, deworming and nutrition needs of your senior horse.

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With advancements in health care, dentistry and nutrition, the senior horse is enjoying unprecedented longevity and quality of life. Today, it's common for horses to perform well into their 20's and live into their 30's and 40's.

Regardless of performance level, the aged horse's body becomes less efficient every year. The digestive system might not absorb nutrients as well, teeth can lose most of the reserve crown, immune systems are weaker, joints probably have some arthritis, hormones sometimes become unbalanced and the respiratory system is more susceptible to challenges.

Overweight horses have added stress on all parts of the body, especially on hooves, increasing the chance of laminitis. Decreased heat tolerance and Cushing's syndrome are additional health hazards.

Long in the Tooth?

Just as proper balancing of hooves is important for a correct gait and good performance, dental arcades (rows of teeth) must be properly balanced and irregularities smoothed to ensure efficient chewing and performance. Unfortunately, senior horses often suffer from lost or damaged teeth.

Dental work is recommended annually, at minimum, and dentistry needs vary significantly from horse to horse. An equine dentist must level and balance waves and ramps, as well as smooth sharp dental points. In the past few years, powered dental instruments have become popular, though some people worry about using them on senior horses. Simply put, the instruments are only as good as the person doing the dental procedure. I find it is more efficient, accurate and quicker to do all dental work using powered dental instruments, using them in combination with hand floats in procedures from simple maintenance to complex burring and balancing.

Parasites Control

Parasites feed off of your horse, resulting in weight loss, dry hair coat and an unthrifty appearance. The parasites reduce blood supply, causing anemia, low protein, and intestinal arterial damage, which cause colic. Today, parasite control is simple and safe. With daily dewormers, control begins when the larval parasite enters the body (versus treating the parasite after it has migrated through the body). Daily deworming begins after the administration of an adulticide/botocide such as ivermectin. Paste deworming should occur every four to six weeks in the South.

Feed the Right Stuff

Nutritional management is more important as horses age, due to decreased digestion. To be safe, stay ahead of potential deficiencies. Keep nutrient levels up with a clean, high-quality, complete pelleted feed. Ingredients should be listed on the feed bag and should include 13-14 percent highly digestible fiber, such as beet pulp, and approximately 14 percent protein. Look for added lysine, methionine and biotin, which enrich the diet with building blocks needed for quality hooves, hair coat and weight maintenance. Fat at 5-6 percent from added vegetable oil or rice bran improves coat condition while increasing caloric content and minimizing grain consumption.

Special senior feeds, such as Seminole's Senior Formula, also contain vitamins and chelated minerals, which are often needed to meet daily requirements. Added yeast culture and probiotics aid digestion.

Yucca can improve joint health, and MOS— shown to improve immune system strength – is also known to bind pathogenic bacteria. Lastly, added molasses and soybean oil make the pellet highly palatable and easily absorbed.

Supplement with hay, hay cubes or pasture. Forage for senior horses should not include coarse or “stemmy” hay. Cubed alfalfa, soaked in water, is a good hay alternative for horses with chewing difficulties.

While some conditions require medical treatment, day-to-day efforts are critical for maximizing years with your horse. Nothing can replace good stabling, good feed, good water and a good friend.

Need advice on feeding your senior horse? Call 1-800-683-1881 to speak with an equine nutritionist. Or ask your local Seminole dealer about Senior Formula, a pelleted feed made specifically for older horses