

Diet and Health of the Older Horse

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The most common causes of weight loss in aged horses are failure to keep up with deworming schedules, debilitating diseases, and/or poor dentition. If an older horse is failing to maintain adequate body weight, despite good deworming schedules, normal appetite and adequate rations, its teeth should be checked carefully, using a full mouth speculum. Merely pulling the tongue to one side to look at the back teeth is not a reliable method of detecting dental abnormalities. If dentition is adequate, check for chronic disease via a thorough physical exam, complete blood count and chemistry panel.

If no other abnormalities are found, the horse may be suffering malabsorption of its nutrients and/or other alterations in digestion. In such horses, a "senior" type ration may help. Such rations should provide at least 12% protein, with restricted calcium (@1.0%) and slightly increased phosphorus (0.3-0.5%) in the total ration. The calcium/phosphorus ratio, however, should be greater than 1:1. Crude fiber content should be above 7%, preferably above 10%, especially if the feed was designed to be fed without hay. Digestibility of the concentrates should be maximized by processing (extrusion, pelleting or "predigestion"). A typical ration for a 1000 lb horse might consist of free access to top quality hay, preferably a straight grass or grass/alfalfa mix or pasture, plus 2 to 8 lbs of a feed designed for old horses, plus free choice water and salt. Avoid straight alfalfa. Its calcium content is high and may exacerbate failing kidney function. Yeast culture products have been reported to improve digestion of feed in horses and also may be of benefit in the failing, aged horse's rations. Two to 4 ounces of brewers yeast and/or up to 1 cup of vegetable oil per day also may help the old horse to maintain weight and condition. Make all dietary changes slowly, gradually introducing the new feeds or supplements over the course of 4 to 5 days.

Older horses are more sensitive to severe weather, be it heat or cold. It is essential that adequate shelter be provided and that the higher energy needs in winter are met by pro-

viding increased feed in a more highly digestible form, such as pelleted or extruded feeds. Constipation/impaction problems can be reduced by insuring free access to clean, fresh, unfrozen water in the winter. If the horse does not drink well, feeding water soaked feeds or mashes (1 to 2 gallons of water per feeding) will help increase fluid intake. Addition of 1 to 2 ounces of salt to the feed may also encourage increased water intake but should be done only if the horse has unlimited access to water.

All horses require regular tooth care. Horse's teeth grow continuously throughout their lives and frequently form sharp points on the outside of the upper molars and inside of the lower molars. These points make it painful to chew and cause the horse to dribble feed or partially chewed boluses of hay from its mouth ("quidding"). The teeth of horses fed dry hay and grain need more frequent attention than those on lush pasture. Tooth loss, especially molars or premolars, also reduces the ability to adequately prehend and chew feed. If an upper molar is lost, the opposing teeth will grow down into the space (wave mouth), making it difficult to chew. Inadequate dentition predisposes the horse to weight loss and/or choke.

Older horses, especially those known to have missing molars, should have their teeth checked at least twice a year. If chewing is difficult, "soups" of pelleted feeds may be fed. Only "complete" pelleted feeds, which are designed to be fed without hay should be used since many pelleted feeds are only grain substitutes and do not contain the proper mineral balance to be used as the major or sole source of nutrition for the horse. Enough water should be added to the pellets to make a soupy consistency (at least 1 quart of water per pound of feed) to prevent choke. Hay can still be fed if choke is not a problem, even if most of it is wasted. Access to good pasture is desirable. However, if front incisors are missing (as in cribbers) or badly aligned, do not rely on pasture for nutrition. These horses must be fed complete feeds or loose hay and/or hay cubes since they can not graze effectively.

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