

SENIOR HORSE NUTRITION

The Educated Horseman Series



Feeding a senior horse can be tricky and requires a more individualized approach to maintain an appropriate body condition score. Over time, a number of factors will change its nutritional management needs including age-related changes in dentition (teeth), gut absorption and potential degenerative disease.

Teeth

As horses age, it is important that their teeth are examined regularly (every six months) by a veterinarian. Irregular wear of incisors and molars will make grazing and grinding forages difficult and affect your horse's ability to extract valuable nutrients. When this occurs, offering long stem hay cubes or alternative complete senior feeds will increase digestibility. Soaking feed may also be required to increase the amount of feed consumed. However, keep in mind that soaking will increase the volume of the feed provided and therefore increase the amount of time required to consume the feed and potentially reduce the overall caloric intake for the day.

Gut Absorption

A reduction in small intestine and large colon function in aged horses will reduce their ability to digest protein and ferment fiber, respectively. Horses with declining kidney and liver function will also struggle to digest and excrete waste created by a high-protein diet. Horses that struggle to ferment fiber will receive less nutrients from consumed forages. It is important that these horses receive high-quality protein that has a balanced amino acid profile (can be found in most commercial senior horse feed) and high-quality fiber (alfalfa). However, care should be taken to not overfeed a senior horse as overconditioning can lead to increased metabolic dysfunction and potential lameness.



Degenerative Disease

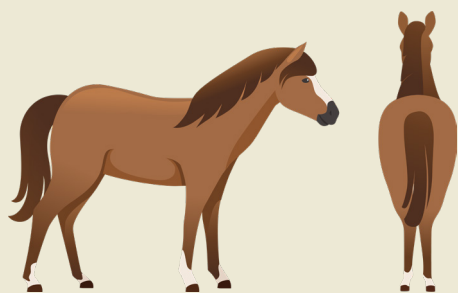
One of the most obvious differences in aged horses is reduced mobility due to arthritic changes. There are a multitude of oral supplements available targeting arthritis and inflammation on the market; however, very few have caused notable improvement in mobility. Maintaining aged horses in pastures provides them the option for increased movement, which is good for overall health. Be sure to provide multiple water sources to minimize the risk of dehydration caused by reluctance to move. Older horses will also eventually begin to move down the pecking order in the herd, increasing the likelihood of getting pushed off feed. Feeding aged horses in an enclosure or grouping aged horses together will allow those with a more complex diet more time to eat and less competition due to reduced herd mates. It is also recommended to place feed buckets at a natural head height off of the ground. This reduces the amount of weight concentrated on the front limbs that occurs when a horse lowers its head, therefore reducing potential increases in pain.

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Horse Body Condition (HBC) of 5 rated “Ideal” or “Moderate”



Healthy Senior Horse Diet

The specific nutritional needs of a healthy senior horse diet should include 12%-16% quality protein, 1% calcium, 0.45%-0.6% phosphorus, 10-25 grams of vitamin C and 4,000 IU/day of vitamin E. Senior horses with an appropriate body condition score of 5-7 should receive 1.5%-2% of their body weight in high-quality forage. Up to half of that can be replaced with cubes, pellets or alternative forage options. Aged horses with a body condition score under 5 should receive additional calories in the form of fat at 0.5%-1.0% of their body weight. Priority should be given to high-quality forages over hay with high percentage of mature stems that can be more difficult to digest. When in doubt, enlist the help of your veterinarian to create a customized plan that will address all of your aged horse's needs.

References

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