

# Feeding Geriatric Horses

*Aging equines who can't properly chew or digest their food need special nutritional care*

## Overview

Just because a horse is older does not necessarily mean he requires a special diet; aging is not a disease. However, many older horses with special physical or nutritional needs (geriatric horses) require specific diets and feed modifications to maintain good health and body condition.

Before jumping in and changing an older horse's diet, however, it is imperative to have a licensed veterinarian perform a full physical examination of the horse and to discuss the special needs of the horse with this veterinarian. Developing a sound nutritional program for a geriatric horse can be quite complex.

Routine examinations, vaccination, deworming, dental care, and farrier visits are integral components of horse ownership and can potentially minimize the development of feeding-related issues as the horse ages. Because we have a generation of horses that received these basics on a regular basis, we are seeing more horses living and working until they are in their late 20s and 30s, and beyond.

Unfortunately, that means many horses are outliving their teeth! Because horse 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 is challenging for these horses.

Keep in mind that horses, like humans, are individual and age differently. A 15-year-old horse might have physical problems due to age (tooth loss, arthritis, metabolic problems) and require a special diet, or you might have a 25-year-old horse that needs no special nutritional care.

## Geriatric Feeding Basics

As long as a horse is healthy and happy, there really is no reason to change his diet. However, a change in diet can significantly improve a geriatric horse's health. Simply switching to a healthier or more suitable



Geriatric horses that can't properly chew hay or grass require special diets.

feed can make a tremendous impact.

Just as a growing horse has special dietary needs, a horse on the other end of the age spectrum also requires special attention due to inefficient absorption of nutrients from feed by an aging (and potentially battle-scarred) intestinal tract, problems with chewing surfaces, or loss of teeth.

Also, many "old horse disorders" can adversely affect the horse's ability to digest and absorb nutrients, or an inappropriate feeding protocol can exacerbate these conditions. These senior maladies can

include equine Cushing's disease; liver, kidney, and intestinal dysfunction; decreased saliva production; tumors; and recurrent airway obstruction (formerly known as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, COPD) or summer pasture-associated obstructive pulmonary disorder (SPAOD). Conversely, one can enhance treatment or better manage these conditions with appropriate nutrition.

Grain-based feeds should be avoided for horses with pituitary dysfunction (i.e., Cushing's) because the high sugar content can stimulate extreme blood sugar and insulin changes. Nutritionists also report bran is a potential kidney stressor because of its high phosphorus content.

There are some tremendous "senior" feeds available on the market designed for geriatric horses (and other horses with chewing or digestive problems), but understand what is in those feeds, as some of the high-sugar senior feeds have been reported to exacerbate liver dysfunction.

You must know what problems your aging horse has before changing his diet. For example, one nutritionist reminds us that horses excrete excess calcium via their kidneys, so alfalfa (which is calcium-rich) isn't recommended for horses with kidney dysfunction.

Most horses do best on a forage-only diet. Unfortunately, that often isn't possible with aged horses that can't chew properly.

All horses should be offered free-choice water, a plain white salt block, and a red (mineral) block. Horse owners should understand that pelleted feeds have the ability to have higher sugars than a sweet feed based on other ingredients in the formula. Score horses' body conditions frequently to assess and adjust the amount of feed you offer to maintain an ideal body weight.

## Special Considerations

**Chewing** For horses with missing or worn teeth, consider feeding forage cubes

or pelleted senior feeds and adding 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).

**Weight loss** Weight changes, particularly weight loss, are not uncommon in aging horses. Metabolic alterations, dental problems, chronic discomfort/pain, internal parasites, malabsorption of nutrients, liver or kidney dysfunction, or debilitating diseases are all thought to be potential causes for loss of condition. Improvements in body condition can likely be achieved by increasing the energy density of the feed and offering a senior ration that is extruded, pre-digested, or pelleted to improve digestibility, and one that is easy to chew.

**Winter** Older or geriatric horses living outside might need more calories in winter since they're burning more energy to keep warm. Hay and forages ferment in the hindgut, and this actually warms the horse from the inside out. Grains don't do this. If you try feeding your older horse extra grain, it won't provide the resources he needs to generate extra body heat. He'll just shiver for warmth instead, which can

be exhausting for the older horse.

**Summer** All horses need shelter from the sun, and geriatrics with Cushing's disease might cease sweating and require extra measures to keep them cooler. Deworming is also important, as research has shown some older horses might have decreased immune responses to parasites. Parasites can damage the gastrointestinal tract and make it harder for the geriatric horse to absorb nutrients it needs.

**Competition** Remember that sometimes older horses cannot compete with younger or more aggressive herdmates who chase or keep them away from food or water sources. Some horses might have slower rates of food consumption, thus they don't get the calories they need in a herd situation.

**Change slowly** It is imperative to make all dietary changes slowly over the course of several days to minimize the potential for gastrointestinal upset.

### Additional Information

Owners using "senior" feeds should read the labels and/or contact manufacturers for product-specific questions regarding

## FAST FACTS

- Aging is not a disease. However, many older horses with special needs (geriatric horses) require specific diet and feed modifications in order to maintain good health and body condition.
- Routine examinations, vaccination, deworming, dental care, and farrier visits can potentially minimize the development of feeding-related issues as the horse ages.
- Many "old horse disorders" can adversely affect the horse's ability to digest and absorb nutrients, and an inappropriate feeding protocol could exacerbate these conditions.
- An aging horse's ability to chew, swallow, and digest feed is a major concern; it can be helpful to soak an appropriate feed to make it easier for the horse to chew and swallow the feed.

energy, mineral content, type and quality of forage (if a complete feed), amount and source of fat, etc. Not all senior feeds are made the same. Agriculture extension specialists are widely available to provide free services for farm and horse owners and can help you find answers to your nutritional questions about your aging horse. ◀



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