

# Feeding Geriatric Horses

*Aging equines that 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.<sup>1</sup> That said, many older horses with special physical or nutritional needs might benefit from being fed a specific diet or feed modification(s) 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 complete physical examination of the horse and to fully discuss the special needs of the horse with this veterinarian.

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 horses age. Because we now 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, 30s, and beyond.

Keep in mind that horses, like humans, all 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.<sup>1</sup> For geriatric horses that are starting to show signs of their age, a diet change can markedly improve their health. Simply switching to a more suitable feed can potentially have a tremendous impact on body condition and health problems.

Just as a growing horse has special dietary needs, a horse on the other end of



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the age spectrum also requires special attention. Inefficient absorption of nutrients from feed by an aging (and potentially battle-scarred) intestinal tract, and problems with chewing surfaces or loss of teeth can impact how horses "use" their feed.

Also, many "old horse disorders" can negatively affect an older horse's ability to digest and absorb nutrients, and 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; recurrent airway obstruction (formerly known as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, COPD), or summer pasture-associated obstructive pulmonary disorder (SPAOD).<sup>1</sup> Conversely, good nutrition can help owners better manage these conditions. Owners should avoid feeding most geriatric horses, especially those with pituitary dysfunction (i.e., equine Cushing's disease), grain-based

feeds. The high sugar content of the grain (or other concentrates like sweet feed) can stimulate extreme changes in blood sugar and insulin levels. Nutritionists also report bran is a potential kidney stressor because of its high phosphorus content.<sup>2</sup>

There are a tremendous variety of "senior" feeds available on the market designed for geriatric horses (and other horses with dental or digestive problems), but it is important for owners to understand what is in these feeds. For example, some of the high-sugar senior feeds have been reported to exacerbate liver dysfunction.

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<sup>3</sup>) isn't recommended for horses with kidney dysfunction.

Ideally, most horses are on a forage-only diet. Unfortunately, forage-only diets are not appropriate for aged horses that can't chew properly, and will not have all of the nutrients required by an older horse.

All horses should be offered free-choice water and a plain white salt block. Not all horses require a red (mineral) block or extra nutritional supplements.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, score horses' body conditions frequently to assess and adjust the amount of feed you offer your horse to maintain an ideal body weight.

## Special Considerations

**Dental Care** Many horses now are outliving their teeth. Because equine 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.

**Chewing** For horses with missing or

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worn teeth, consider feeding forage cubes, chopped hay products, soaked hay, or pelleted senior feeds with 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).<sup>1,5</sup>

**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, predigested, or pelleted to improve digestibility, and easy to chew.<sup>1,5</sup>

**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

likely 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 cool. Deworming is also important, as research has shown some older horses (particularly those with Cushing's disease<sup>6</sup>) might have decreased immune responses to parasites. Parasites can damage the gastrointestinal tract and make it harder for the geriatric horse to absorb the necessary nutrients.

**Competition** Remember that sometimes older horses cannot compete with younger or more aggressive herdmates that 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.<sup>4</sup>

### Additional Information

Owners using "senior" feeds should read the labels and/or contact manufacturers

for product-specific questions regarding 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. 🐾

### KEY REFERENCES

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Further reading and free health e-newsletter: [www.TheHorse.com/Feed-old-horses](http://www.TheHorse.com/Feed-old-horses).

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