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CARE OF THE OLDER HORSE

With good housing, food, farriery, and veterinary care our geriatric horses are living for much longer. With this extended life span comes a few points to consider.

Teeth

Horses have a full mouth by 5 years old and these teeth will erupt continuously throughout the horses life. Eventually the teeth will wear down and fall out. Regular dental checks to prevent sharp points and to maintain the grinding surfaces will help your older horse to get the nutritional value out of its food for longer. When mouths are not functioning optimally, the introduction of soaked pelleted feed can help your horse maintain weight.

Nutrition

Older horses are more prone to laminitis (see Cushings section). To maintain weight it is better to keep them on feeds that are high in fibre, protein and fats instead of sugars. Some will require three or four buckets of feed a day, especially if they can no longer graze or eat hay. These feeds could include sugar beet, soaked fibre/grass pellets, small amounts of a balanced mineral/vitamin supplement and the addition of oils. Vegetable oil will add calories to food, micronized linseed is also good as it is very high in Omega 3s which support joint health. Older horses are likely to need rugs in cold weather and will find it harder to regulate their own temperature.



Feet

Many horses will be unshod later in life. They can do well without shoes, but regular farriery is still essential to prevent deterioration in the shape of the hoof, which can pre-dispose to abscesses or laminitis.

Cushings

The number of horses with pars pituitary intermedia dysfunction (Cushings) increases with age. This could reduce your horse's immunity to disease and pre-dispose them to laminitis. It is possible to control some side-effects of this disease with medication. If your horse has Cushings you may need to clip them regularly to stop them sweating under their heavier coats. (See Cushings information sheet for full information).

Laminitis

Older horses and ponies, especially those with Cushings or on unlimited turnout and no exercise may be more prone to laminitis. Sometimes it can be difficult to tell the difference between stiffness and soreness in the front feet. If in any doubt, it is a good idea to get your horse checked by a vet, as the recommended management for each condition is quite different.

Locomotion

It is a good idea to try and keep your horses moving where possible to avoid stiffening of the joints. This may include turnout, light ridden work or even hand walks! After a long career, some horses will require regular pain relief to allow them to get about. This could be in the form of phenylbutazone (Bute).



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