



OLD DOESN'T MEAN POOR

As the founder of Save a Horse Australia Horse Rescue and Sanctuary, I often see people struggling with their aged horse's weight and a large number of the horses surrendered to us are over 15 years old, mostly in poor condition.

It is a myth that all aged horses will lose top line and once it has been lost it can't be regained. With the correct care and feeding regime, aged horses can maintain their body weight and if they are in poor condition, can gain weight again and live a happy healthy retirement.

As a horse ages it becomes more susceptible to arthritis, anaemia, deficiencies, respiratory conditions and skin conditions. Once a horse gets to its mid teens, it suffers from reduced salivation and its digestive system slows down, reducing the ability to absorb nutrients. When a horse is not absorbing important nutrients, its immune system will not be strong enough to fight off infection and illness and the animal will be more susceptible to falling ill and long recovery periods.

The first and foremost thing to remember when caring for an aged horse, is to have its teeth checked by a veterinarian or equine dentist every 6 months. This will help identify any issues with your horse's teeth that may prevent him from grazing and chewing his food properly.

A full blood test isn't expensive - costing around \$100 depending on your vet and is worth doing every 12 months to identify any underlying issues with your old horse. It will also establish if your horse is suffering from any deficiencies or organ failure. If there are any abnormalities found, your vet will be able to help you with medication or supplements.

Due to the change in a horse's digestive system from its mid teens, it's best not to feed raw whole grain. It is not well digested in the small intestine and can cause fermenting, gas, heat and ammonia in the caecum. This can cause your horse to lose appetite, develop diarrhoea, laminitis, cause colic and even death.

There are a number of excellent extruded pellet products on the market which are formulated for older horses to aid in easy digestion and provide adequate vitamin and mineral intake. We use a pellet made by Laucke Mills, called Cool Plus (you could also use Mitavite Gumnuts). Both are extremely good products for older horses (15 years+).

Older horses need a diet high in digestible fibre and high in oils which also has a high fat content. Cold pressed canola oil is the best for older horses with a balance of 10% omega 3 fatty acids, 20% omega 6 fatty acids and omega 9 fatty acids. Omega 3 – 6 are

essential for tissue function, rheumatoid arthritis, vision, healthy heart function and other inflammatory diseases.

Older horses also need a diet higher in protein - but it's important not to over feed protein as this can lead to scouring. It's best to monitor your horse's manure and if it is a little loose, then reduce the amount of protein and oil until it is forming properly. Slippery Elm Bark is good for scouring (1 – 2 tablespoons per day).

A full fat soy meal such as Soygize is an excellent source of protein and has been formulated as a supplement to help improve top line in older horses. It contains 39% protein, so only a small amount is needed to be beneficial.

Copra Meal is another high protein supplement but only contains 20% crude protein.

Soy isn't the best product to use long-term but is excellent at getting weight on an aged horse, especially topline, whereas Copra is a more natural product and better for long-term use.

In aged horses, vitamin B and C are less able to be synthesized and it is important to make sure that your horse is getting adequate supplements. Vitamin C is naturally found in Rose Hip Herb and is a better form than a commercial supplement. Vitamin B group in the form of brewer's yeast would also help with digestion.

You will find that your old horse may have trouble grazing due to broken or missing teeth, so it's important to make sure you feed enough roughage to compensate (along with pellets, full fat soy and supplements). Chaff is best because it's easier to chew and swallow and to make it easier and more enjoyable, wet it down and feed over 2 – 3 meals per day.

It's also beneficial to give your horse a good clean out with psyllium husks every 1 – 2 months. One cup for 4 days is all that is needed and this will clean any sand out of the digestive system - but remember not to feed it every day because the horse's system will develop an acid that will digest the husks and it will lose its benefit of cleaning the system. At Save a Horse Australia Horse Rescue and Sanctuary we have had many very poor aged horses come through our doors and with the right healing and feeding program each horse has gained weight, become healthy and many have been re-homed to loving retirement homes. Most of these horses in their late 20's and early 30's.

We use a number of different herbs to help aid in the healing process, including, Chamomile, Rose Hip, Slippery Elm, and Marshmallow. All of these herbs are soft on the horse's stomach, aiding in digestion and general well being of the horse.

Please note that it is important to have a full blood test done to rule out kidney or liver failure before trying to put weight on an underweight, aged horse because if your horse does have kidney or liver failure you will need a completely different diet. Consult your vet for information.

An old horse doesn't mean a poor horse and with the correct feed and medical care, you will help your horse live a full, happy retirement with the love and attention he deserves.

This article is not a substitute for professional veterinarian advice.

Written by

Amanda Vella

President,

Save A Horse Horse Rescue & Sanctuary

