

## Caring for the Aged Horse ~ Age is no excuse for NEGLECT!

*Project Hope Horse Welfare Victoria Inc (PHHWV) attends many cases each year involving older horses where the horse's welfare has become compromised. We also receive many requests for information about feeding and looking after aged horses.*

### Introduction

There are no hard and fast rules for what determines an aged horse and what care they will require. One thing is certain; the older a horse gets the more care it will need. This will mean an increase in your time and money and often without the benefits of being able to ride. Generally the smaller pony breeds tend to live longer than the larger heavier breeds, however it is not uncommon to see a Shetland or a Shire horses live well into their thirties. For the purpose of this educational flyer we will classify an aged horse as being over 15 years old.

Just like humans, horses are living longer, and just like humans, depending on the type of life the horse or pony had in its early years will determine how it will need to be cared for in its senior years. Due to the wonders of modern veterinary medicine horses are not only living longer, they are able to be ridden at an older age. It is beneficial for a horse to continue to be lightly ridden well into its twenties. However, as we get older we all start to feel aches and pains, our dietary needs to change; we may need regular medication for ailments. Horses are no different. In many instances they will require special feeding; more frequent dental treatments and farrier visits, their overall health will need to be closely monitored and some may even need to be relocated to a more suitable environment to spend their retirement years. The notion of putting an old horse out to pasture to live out its days without closely monitoring and implementing change is an irresponsible one. Horse owners need to remember age is no excuse for neglect.

### Feeding

As horses get older and their digestive system begin to slow down their dietary needs and the state of their dental health will change. Aged horses require easily digestible feeds including fibre and carbohydrates that are low in starch, and contain a balanced mix of vitamins and minerals.

Easily digestible fibre is feed stuffs that have a soft feel and will require minimal chewing, unlike grains (oats, barley etc.). Feed companies have many products on the market aimed at the aged horse that have been formulated to have the required levels of protein and fat, as well as the necessary vitamins and minerals. Owners need to make sure when selecting these types of feeds that they are easy to chew. Several products on the market are very hard and soaking them in order to soften them can cause the horse to scour.

The aged horse's diet should consist of oaten and lucerne chaff with a pellet or extruded feed e.g. equine senior, gumnuts, equi jewel.

Another option for horses that may not be able to chew and or digest the harder feeds is pulp of sugar beet e.g. speedy beet and rice base feeds such as Lympia pellets and rice bran. Owners that want to feed grains need to make sure they are crushed, or cooked. All feed should be dampened with water to aid the digestion process. Good quality hay is also another good source of fibre and digestible energy, provided your horse has most of its teeth. Most of the major feed companies provide a free service where they can analyse your horse's current diet and provide you with information on getting your horse what is required, however these companies will generally recommend their own brand of feeds in the analysis. Remember to introduce any new feeds over seven to ten days and to feed quantities relevant to horses size e.g. a Shetland ponies requirements would differ greatly to an larger TB type.

### Dental Care

The aged horse will be prone to dental problems. The horses ability to digest feed and for their digestive tract to absorb all the nutrients from the feed is greatly reduced if a horse is unable to use their teeth effectively. Even if the horse has received yearly dental treatments since its youth it is inevitable that the horse's jaw and teeth will change as they age. These changes cause the incisors (front teeth) to slope forward, compromises their ability to graze especially of very short pasture. Also their molars (back teeth) will develop sharp points and the grinding surface of these teeth can become flat and ineffective. Horses can also loose teeth as they get older. Missing teeth can cause food to be caught in the gaps and can quickly become smelly if not flushed out regularly. Therefore the aged horse should have their teeth tended to twice yearly and will also need to have a diet that accommodates these changes to their teeth.

### Hoof Care

Keeping your aged horses feet trimmed every six to eight weeks is very important in retirement. The aged horse is more likely to suffer from debilitating ailments and diseases such as arthritis, Cushings, seedy toe and navicular. Horses that have suffered laminitis during their life may even need to have specialist shoeing for the remainder of their life.

### Worming

Worming of a horse is just as important as they get older, however your worming program may need to be altered depending on your horse's health. Horses with digestive problems may require a worming preparation that will reduce the risk of colic. Consult your veterinarian regarding the appropriate worming program for your horse.

### Workload

Keeping your aged horse moving is important to keep their mind active and prevent their joints from becoming stiff. Allowing your horse to move around will assist with the symptoms associated with arthritis, as well as help prevent obesity. Whilst you and your horse may not be able to undertake the activities you used to, a small walk

around the block once a week, being lead or ridden, would be a great benefit. You may at times find the opportunity to put another horse in the same paddock with your aged horse. Allowing your aged horse to play horsey games with its friends is very important to its well being, even for short periods. Just make sure they are well matched, younger horses can sometimes be a little too playful with older ones and this can lead to injuries.

### Environment

It is very important that you look at the over all environment your aged horse is kept in. Aged horses tend to be slower eaters so you need to ensure that they are not getting pushed away from their feed by younger or more dominate horses. Older horses like to take their time eating their feed and are happy to walk off and come back to it over time. If you have several horses together you need to carefully watch how they interact at different times of the day and ensure that the aged horse is happy and not being bullied.

It is also important to ensure your aged horse has suitable access to water. Aged horses may have trouble negotiating the banks of a dam, especially if the water level is low. Having water in a trough is preferable if you have an aged horse.

Keeping your aged horse on hilly ground may also pose a problem. A slight incline is fine but a paddock on the side of a hill is not. Horses kept in this situation tend to stick to the one spot and not move around.

Providing shelter to your horse is very important, especially if they are not rugged. Shelter can be in the form of a three sided walk-in-walk-out box, trees or a hedge. A horse will grow a winter coat that will provide it protection however once the horse becomes wet, heat loss is increased by 20 percent. A horse that is rugged and/or has shelter will use less energy to stay warm. If your aged horse is used to being rugged then this should be continued during the colder months in its later years. The synthetic rugs on the market are

generally more suitable that the heavier canvas rugs as they provide greater warmth and are light weight. You need to remove the rug regularly to monitor your horse's condition and to make sure your horse does not get too hot.

### Over all Health

An annual visit from your veterinarian, including blood testing, can help your horse live longer. Many disorders such as liver and kidney problems can be detected with these tests before any symptoms can become apparent. Also, a veterinarian's hands-on examination is vital and can pick up things that you may not be able to see, like failing eye sight, arthritis, heart murmurs and melanomas, particularly in grey horses.

Aged horses can develop problems very quickly. Paying particular attention to your horse's weight and ensuring their body condition is maintained is very important. Extreme weight gain can lead to founder and extreme weight loss can compromise your horse's immune system. Signs of digestive problems such as whole grains being passed and scouring can be seen by checking your horse's manure, and should be treated immediately.

Aged horses don't bounce back quickly from injury and illness. It is therefore important not to delay veterinary treatment if your horse is showing any of these signs. Regularly monitoring of their water intake, feed intake, demeanour, and checking they are still alert and moving around should be assessed weekly. This will ensure you have a healthier and happier horse for years to come.

### Resources

PHHWV Farwell Booklet "A Guide to Humane Equine Euthanasia"

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