

WHEN ARE HORSES CONSIDERED OLD?



HOW SHOULD OLD HORSES BE FEED?

The natural lifespan of the horse has not changed from history to the present, with most horses surviving 25 years or older with ease. At what age the horse should be considered geriatric depends on the individual, as some horses age more gracefully than others. The general rule of thumb is to be considered 18 to 20 years old. Some horses remain excellent in bodily condition and health until the moment of death, while others deteriorate slowly or rapidly over time. Because of the physiological changes normally associated with aging, geriatrics may require special adaptations in health, environment, and diet.

With aging, a decrease in nutrient absorption, bad teeth, environmental and herd stress and diseases can be seen. The causes of decreased nutrient absorption are varied. Intestinal worms can cause chronic mucosal damage in the intestines and affect nutrient absorption. However, due to effective and routine parasite treatments applied today, horses have a better chance of surviving to an older age. Apart from parasites, there are other factors that cause decreased absorption of nutrients through the digestive system. The activity of the intestinal mucosa decreases with age, making it difficult for nutrients to cross the mucosal surface to reach the bloodstream. A recent study has shown that phosphorous, vitamin and protein absorption is reduced in older horses. Production of enzymes necessary for starch digestion may be reduced and too much starch is allowed to enter the large intestine. Microbial fermentation of starch makes the horse more acidic, which can make a horse more susceptible to major diseases such as laminitis and colic.

Age-related disorders and diseases can make life more challenging for the geriatric horse. Weight loss unrelated to the issues previously discussed may be the result of conditions such as chronic infection, adrenal gland atrophy, liver failure, or kidney dysfunction. Other problems that the elderly often face are anemia, lowering of disease resistance and allergic respiratory problems. Tumors such as melanomas appear on the skin, particularly in gray horses. Tumors can be found in the thyroid glands. These symptoms are also an indication of Cushing's syndrome. With adrenal atrophy or even adrenal depletion after a hard winter, horses drink excess water and do not lose weight easily.



Geriatric horse nutrition

Forage is an important part of livestock and without the proper amounts, digestive system problems can occur. Dental problems or a lack of appetite can make it difficult for feeders to obtain adequate feed. Older horses may do better on fresh green grass, even if they have lost some of their molars, as the grass is easily chewed and digested.

It is important that the amount of protein is sufficient. Protein digestion appears to be a particular problem in geriatric horses, especially in those with parasitic damage to the digestive tract. Loss of muscle tissue is a common event in the aging horse. If the body does not have enough protein in the diet, it will begin to break down its own muscle tissue to provide protein for important bodily functions. Since the ability to absorb protein in the digestive system decreases, the food offered to geriatrics should be higher in protein and rich in quality than that given to a normal nursing horse.

Oil can be added to increase the energy value of the feed. However, care should be taken in horses with liver problems. This can also be important for horses with respiratory problems. The use of yeast can improve fiber and phosphorus digestion in feed. Vitamin and mineral supplementation should be higher than in adult horses due to reduced digestive efficiency.

If ready-made feeds are used, it is important that they are well-formulated feed and produced by steam cooking, micronization or extruding methods.

If we are aware of the problems geriatric horses face, they will have the chance to live healthy and long in the field. Routine care of the geriatric horse, changes in its environment and dietary management can help achieve this goal.



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