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## **SOME SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR GETTING YOUR OLDER HORSE THROUGH THE WINTER?**

When I was a kid I used to ride my pony Timmie in the Best Veterans classes at the local shows. These were for horses 15 years and older and were judged on condition and way of going, they were like hunter classes. The entrants (horses) were normally in their late teens and there would typically be one or two horses in their early twenties and these would typically win. Timmie and I were active members of the local Pony Club, competing in all disciplines and fox hunting often more than 10 days a season. I grew out of him when he was 19 at which point we leased him to a local family who used him for Prince Philip cup games which he excelled at. He later returned to us and continued to teach numerous pony clubbers the basics and hunted a least a couple of days a season until he died age 24. This was a good age then. Today horses are commonly active well into their twenties; my subsequent pony club horse is pushing 30 and takes my mother on adventures most weekends.

While there are many vibrant active older horses there are equally as many who look tired, whose coats no longer have luster and who act as though they are biding their time. Whether your older horse is still full of life or not looking quite as he did in his youth, winter is probably the older horse's toughest season. Not only do older horses have a harder time keeping warm, they may have dental problems and their bodies are not as efficient at utilizing food as they used to be so they can often be hard to keep weight on. On top of that, once they have lost condition it is particularly hard to get it back. Add to this the fact that their immune systems are likely not what they were so they are perhaps more at risk of picking up respiratory conditions and may not have the defenses to fight them. It is pretty clear that the older horse takes very careful management. The management corners you were able to cut in your horse's younger days will have far greater consequences in old age.

Your older horse may require things that he has never needed in the past. Do not think that just because he did not need it in the past that he does not need it now. For example, you need to take extra precautions to insure that your horse is warm and this may mean using blankets even if you have never needed to use one in the past. If he is no longer an easy keeper consider feeding good grass hay free choice. Sugar beet pulp, rice bran, flax, are all good feeds for older horses, those who are still working may need the added benefit of feeds such as oats, barley and senior feeds. Senior feeds are often "complete" feeds meaning they can be fed without the need of hay if fed in the quantities recommended by the manufacture. This is typically only necessary if you have a horse with serious dental problems meaning that it is unable to eat long stem hays. The cost of senior feeds makes such feeding strategies inhibitive for most people unless absolutely necessary. Plus, eating hay as the roughage source is preferable for maintaining good gut health. There is also the concern that many senior feeds contain high levels of molasses and corn. Older horses are more susceptible to cushings disease which is a chronic progressive disease of the intermediate pituitary gland of older horses. Horses with this disease also tend to suffer from hyperinsulinemia and hyperglycemia and therefore should not be fed feeds that contribute substantial amounts of glucose to the blood stream which corn and molasses do. (Note that horses may suffer from hyperinsulinemia and hyperglycemia often called insulin resistance, metabolic syndrome or syndrome x, without having cushings). The National Research Council this year stated that it may be prudent to feed older horses diets lower in these types of ingredients. Strangely enough despite the name sugar beet pulp, if un-molassed, sugar beet pulp is actually a great feed to feed horses with this condition as it has a very low glyceimic

index. Another option for horses with poor teeth is to feed hay cubes or pellets that have been soaked in water to make them soft. Extruded and/or micronized feeds are good for older horses. The nutrients are more easily digestible which is good for the inefficient digestive system. If straight barley is fed as a grain source it should have been heat treated in some way to make the starch more available.

An older horse's internal organs may not function as effectively as they did so feeding diets that do not put a lot of strain on them may be wise. For example feeding a diet high in excess protein is of no great concern (although it has been shown to reduce performance) as excess protein is broken down and processed by the kidneys which excrete the extra nitrogen as urea in urine. Except in an older horse the kidneys may not function as well as they once did. In addition, the process takes energy (that is one of the principles of the Atkins diet) which is something you do not want in a horse that needs to conserve as much energy as possible. You need every possible calorie to go to maintaining body weight. It has been estimated that the older horse's energy needs are 10% higher than that of a younger horse. The older horse's digestive tract may not absorb nutrients as well as it did in the past so making sure nutrients are high quality and easy to absorb is important. Feeding chelated or proteinated minerals (minerals attached to a protein or amino acid) are important along with high enough levels of essential amino acids such as lysine and methionine.

Dental check-ups are a particularly important part of your older horse management and should be performed once a year or more often if your horse has a problem. Older horses are more likely to have missing teeth or not enough tooth to be able to chew their food adequately. If they have not received regular dental care during their lives, sharp edges may have built up on the teeth at the back of their mouths that may dig into and lacerate their cheeks. All these can make eating a hard or even painful process. If you watch your horse eating and notice he is dropping food out of the sides of his mouth, known as "quidding", it is a sure sign that he needs dental work and you should call your vet or equine dentist. Even if he is able to keep food in his mouth, if the food is not adequately chewed before it is swallowed he will be at a higher risk for compaction colics. Check your horse's feces and see how large the hay particles are. If you see hay that looks like it was not adequately chewed, call your vet and/or equine dentist to get teeth checked and to discuss the potential need to feed pellets or cubes.

As to what constitutes an older horse, the National Research Council (2007) considers 20 to be the threshold for old age in horses, although there will be variation around the number based on the individual horse; in some it may be as young as 15. The National Animal Health Monitoring System estimated that in 1998 7.5% of the total US horse population (total estimated at 7 million) were 20 years or older. Having an older horse often means more work for you, and yet you will be richly rewarded for your efforts with a horse that has a wealth of knowledge and experiences to share with you. Plus, your careful management may just buy you more time with your special friend. ☺

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