

THE OLD HORSE - 'the geriatric patient'

What you need to know about older horses

On average, our horses are getting older and older. This is mainly due to the evolution from workhorse to recreational horse and the increased medical care for them. Senior horses are more susceptible to a number of disorders and undergo (often physiological) changes. They therefore require extra care and management. We focus in particular on dental problems in the senior horse as well as on the importance of an appropriate ration.

When is a horse geriatric (elderly)?

On average, a horse belongs to the geriatric patients from the age of 20, but this limit moves towards the age of 25 in our well cared for horses. In addition, there are, of course, considerable individual differences. The age record for a horse is currently no less than 62 years ('Old Billy'). Ponies usually get older than horses.

What changes with age?

- Less efficient digestion
- Less resistant bones and joints
- Arthritis and osteoarthritis resulting in lameness
- Weaker immune system and slower recovery after illness
- Recurrent parasitic infections
- Respiratory problems
- Dental problems
- Hormonal changes (e.g. Cushing's disease)
- Loss of condition
- Weight loss
- Reduced organ functions (heart, liver, kidneys,...)



When should I intervene?

As soon as your horse shows the first signs that may be associated with the above changes, it is best to contact your vet. Often the first symptoms are weight and condition loss, a dull coat and more difficult eating. In senior horses it is advisable to check their teeth first and adjust their diet. Also the exclusion of parasitic infections is very important. Finally, a general blood test is useful to evaluate organ functions (especially liver and kidneys) and adjust the diet accordingly.

In nature, dental problems in senior horses are the biggest threat to the life expectancy of the horse. An old horse should also be able to eat easily, **so don't think that quidding and slow eating are inherently linked to the age of your horse!**

Dental problems of the old horse

Various dental problems are common in senior horses, some of the most important;

- Chronic abnormalities that developed over time
 - Wave teeth or step teeth
 - Extreme hooks
 - Moved, broken and/or infected molars
 - Scissors bite

-> To be prevented or limited by routine (annual) dental treatments



- Senile diastema
 - A diastema (plural diastemata) is a space between 2 teeth. This is usually a gap between the teeth where food accumulates and decomposes. The result is a serious inflammation of the surrounding structures (gums, tooth socket, tooth attachment). This condition is extremely painful and often results in loosening of the teeth.
Read more about this in 'diastema in horses'.
- Loose teeth
 - Possible as a result of senile diastema or as a normal physiological process in a final stage of wear and tear of the tooth. Loose teeth cause great discomfort and pain in the horse's mouth.
- EOTRH
 - EOTRH stands for 'Equine Odontoclastic Tooth Resorption and Hypercementosis'. It involves a slowly evolving damage to the incisors (possibly canines) of senior horses. Some breeds such as Icelandic seem to be extra sensitive to this. The disease particularly affects the roots of the incisors, causing gum inflammation and eventual tooth loss.



How often and by whom should I have my old horse's teeth checked?

Usually an annual dental check-up prevents many problems. However, really old horses can quickly develop serious problems, 1 loose or broken molar can seriously affect your horse. It is therefore important to keep an eye on your old horse's eating behaviour at all times. Every time you notice that he is eating with more difficulty, a check-up is recommended.

Dental treatment for old horses is often more painful because of the potentially serious conditions in the mouth. In addition, it more often includes procedures such as tooth extractions or diastema treatments. These treatments should be carried out under sedation and possibly local anaesthesia. In some cases, medical treatment or post-treatment is also necessary. These treatments may only be carried out by veterinarians. It is best to contact a veterinarian who has sufficient expertise in this specific matter.

Rationary adjustments

Rations should always be adjusted with caution and slowly. Horses are very sensitive to sudden changes in their diet. In addition, there is no standard solution for every old horse. The diet is highly dependent on the illnesses and condition of your horse.

The general rule applies;

- The old horse is less economical with its feed, so it often needs more of it than its younger counterpart. The amount of food a horse can process per feed is limited, which makes it better to feed the horse several times smaller quantities.
- Good quality hay, chopped and pre-soaked or supplemented with grass pellets.
- Well soaked beet pulp (good source of calcium)
- Preference for crushed cereals or even better extruded horse feeds. The latter are already preheated and therefore much easier to digest. Most commercial 'senior feeds' contain extruded ingredients.
- Supplementation in the feed of Ca (calcium) and P (phosphorus) at a ratio of approximately 1/1. Senior horses have a greater need for phosphorus, the diet best consists of 0.3-0.4% phosphorus.
- Supplementation of vitamins (mainly B and C)
- Sufficient protein supply (12 to 16% recommended for old horses)
- Adding vegetable oil (linseed oil, corn germ oil, sunflower oil) increases calorie intake without greatly increasing volume. Slow introduction and up to 250 ml/day for a normal horse.

PLEASE NOTE: the above assumes a 'healthy' old horse. If your horse suffers from reduced liver and/or kidney function, for example, the diet should be adjusted accordingly. In case of liver problems restriction of fat and proteins. In the case of kidney problems, low-protein, and be careful with Ca/P supplement. Ask your vet for extra support in drawing up the ration.

Some possible senior feeds:

- <https://www.houbenpaardenvoer.be/webshop-houben-paardenvoer/senioren>
- <https://avevewinkels.be/Producten/Detail/dier/ezel/krachtvoeder/all-in-soup/95fe6>
- <http://www.pavo.be/essentials/producten/pavo-slobbermash>
- <http://www.cavalor.com/us-en/products/details/119/cavalor-strucomix-senior>

In addition, think of extra roughage such as chopped hay, grass chunks (preferably not real pellets but slightly coarser 'cubes' that are soaked). Also cut maize (typical fibre length 1-1.5 cm) as often used with cows can, to a limited extent (approx. 0.5-1 bucket per day), be a good addition to provide sufficient fibre.

Winter period

Old horses suffer more in harsh winter periods, they need a lot of energy to keep themselves warm. Extra energy supply and shelter for the worst cold is therefore necessary. Cold weather also reduces water absorption, you can compensate this by offering lukewarm water and/or soaking all the feed properly. Extra salt intake can also stimulate water absorption. Please note that sufficient water can easily be available at all times.

TIP: take photos of your horse at regular intervals (sideways and from behind your horse) so that you have a good basis for comparison in order to be able to assess your horse's condition. If you see your horse on a daily basis, it is much more difficult to observe (small) changes over time. A ribbon to measure the abdominal circumference can also be a good idea.

For more information about the old horse or other dental problems with the horse you can always contact us.



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