

Caring for the Older Horse

The life span of our horses is increasing:

- approximately 29% of the UK horse population are older than 15 years of age;
- many older horses continue to have a useful working life and still participate in regular athletic activity;
- a recent study showed that older horses received less preventive health care measures, such as vaccination, farriery and routine veterinary care, when in fact they often need an increased level of care in these areas.



Health problems of the older horse

- Causes of weight loss in older horses include dental problems, reduced digestion of nutrients, equine Cushing's disease (PPID¹), and chronic pain.
- Older horses have different nutritional requirements to younger horses.
- Arthritis is common in older horses; signs are chronic lameness, stiff gait, and sometimes bony enlargements around the joints.
- Older horses can develop cancer of the skin and/or internal organs. These do not necessarily pose an immediate threat to a horse's life, but need to be addressed and managed for continuing quality of life.
- Heart murmurs are found more often in older horses and their significance can be assessed by your vet.
- Several eye conditions are more common with advancing age; your vet can assess the significance of these changes for you.



IT CAN BE DIFFICULT TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN NORMAL AGEING AND SIGNS OF DISEASE, SO REGULAR VETERINARY VISITS ARE IMPORTANT TO HELP DETECT HEALTH PROBLEMS EARLY.

KEY POINTS:

Older horses require:

- annual vaccinations
- regular dental examinations (usually at least every six months)
- worm control
- regular farriery
- regular health checks.

¹ Pars Pituitary Intermedia Dysfunction (PPID)



Treatment

- Regular check-ups are an ideal way to ensure that any problems are identified and treated promptly.
- Older horses should be vaccinated even if they don't travel. Other horses can pass on diseases such as flu and older horses are still susceptible to tetanus.
- Although arthritis is very common in older horses there are several treatment options available at all stages of the disease; to improve performance, maintain soundness or to reduce discomfort. Discuss the options suitable for your horse with your vet.
- Dental problems are common in older horses, signs may include weight loss, quidding (dropping food), and food packing in the cheeks or favouring one side of the mouth when chewing.
- Laboratory tests on a blood sample can give an early warning of abnormal organ function.
- Equine Cushing's disease (PPID¹) is common in older horses and can now be easily tested for and managed with a daily tablet treatment.
- Older horses can be more prone to parasites such as worms and also external parasites such as lice, so including them in your deworming programme is vital.

¹ Pars Pituitary Intermedia Dysfunction (PPID)

FOCUS ON DENTAL CARE

- A significant proportion of weight loss cases seen in older horses involve dental problems.
- A lot of horses are very stoical about dental pain, so regular examinations are essential.
- Diastema (gaps) develop between teeth in older age allowing food to become trapped causing painful gum disease.
- Teeth may fall out or become loose in later life.
- The grinding surface of the tooth roots can become smooth, preventing effective chewing.
- The loss of teeth can result in the overgrowth of the opposing teeth and sharp jagged edges.
- Regular dental examinations allow problems to be identified and treated earlier.
- Where dental function can't be improved your vet can offer advice on feeding.



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