

**HORSE 20**

# Care of the **older horse**



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homeless pets since 1897.**



## Care of the older horse

Horses, like people, are enjoying longer lives and better health than their grandparents. An older horse can work well into its 20s if managed accordingly. Many competition horses and ponies continue to enjoy a productive career with younger riders. However, once a horse has to retire the responsibility for providing for it lies with its present keeper.

## Taking on an older horse

Whilst in this leaflet we will discuss some of the problems older horses may develop, do not be discouraged from taking one on. For the younger or more novice rider it is a very sensible choice. A 'schoolmaster' pony is well worth the extra effort to care for it in the confidence and experience it can give a child. For a first horse or pony one would be wise to choose an animal in its teens. Horses are traditionally described as 'aged' from nine years onwards. However this would now be viewed as the 'prime' of the horse and a decline not really expected to set in until perhaps the mid teens. Declining physical prowess is tempered by wisdom, and is not always a bad thing – see the pet care leaflet, Choosing a riding horse (H1).

## The ageing horse

As the horse starts to age it is likely to show obvious signs of getting older by the grey hairs around the eyes, ears, forehead and muzzle. It may suffer from a certain amount of muscle degeneration and have a noticeably reduced muscle development over its top line. The older horse may also have a hollowed appearance to the face with deep depressions above the eyes.

The horse may however, develop more serious signs of ageing and this can range from loss of appetite and difficulty eating, to laminitis, arthritis, Cushing's disease, cataracts and weight loss.

In all circumstances where the horse is showing signs of illness or deteriorating health, it is advisable to contact a veterinary surgeon so that the horse can be assessed thoroughly. An annual health check when your horse has its vaccinations will allow you to catch any developing problems early.

## Common age related disorders

### Arthritis

With advancing years comes an increased risk of arthritis. Most older horses will gradually develop joint stiffness in the form of arthritis, this is often accelerated in a joint which has been damaged in the past. Generally you will notice a shorter stride, slower movement and reduced flexibility. However, good management and appropriate exercise on veterinary advice, can reduce the degree to which it inhibits the horse. There are many feed supplements available which are widely used to aid joint repair and reduce stiffness.

### Liver and kidneys

Possible signs that a horse may be suffering from potential liver and kidney problems are general poor body and coat condition and in some cases loss of appetite, which in turn leads to weight loss. Prolonged use of certain drugs to manage other health problems may have a lasting adverse affect on a horse's liver and kidney function.

Veterinary advice should be sought if the horse is showing signs of ill health, before embarking on sustained drug therapy for other conditions.

### **Cataracts**

A cataract is a cloudy opacity which forms in the lens. It can occur progressively in some horses as a symptom of old age. Sight may be lost because of the cataract. The partially sighted horse requires careful management, being approached and handled with consideration.

### **Sarcoids and melanomas**

Melanomas and sarcoids are the most common skin tumours of the horse. More commonly seen on the aged horse, they usually develop on the more sensitive areas of the body, such as the inner thigh, belly, eyelids, udder, sheath and dock. Sarcoids often grow rapidly,

frequently ulcerating and becoming infected. Notorious for recurring, early diagnosis and treatment of sarcoids is essential. Most elderly grey horses have at least one melanoma, though often without any problem as this type of tumour is slow growing and generally less aggressive than sarcoids.

Older horses, especially greys, should be inspected regularly for signs of skin nodules or growths and their development monitored with your vet.

### **Degenerative joint disease**

Degenerative joint disease causes lameness in horses affected by this condition. Cartilage that protects the bones of the joint is gradually worn away over time and can affect any joint. The areas most susceptible include the upper knee joint, fetlocks in the front legs, hocks, and coffin joints in the forefeet. As the horse ages, the cartilage may wear down considerably, resulting in bone grinding on bone, causing the horse a more increased level of lameness. Veterinary advice should be sought at early signs of lameness.

### **Loss of body condition**

Loss of body condition is a common cause of complaint from owners of older horses, particularly of the less hardy breeds, such as Thoroughbreds. Aged horses cannot readily replace weight losses and become more susceptible to physical stress and disease. In general preventing your old





horse losing weight early in the winter is best; it is far harder to try to get weight back onto the horse after the new year. For a horse prone to losing too much weight in winter, begin rugging and extra feeding in autumn as soon as the nights begin to get cooler and the grass slows its growth.

Once detected your vet can offer several treatments for Cushing's disease which improve the horse's quality of life; all treatments are lifelong. Early detection is vital before it causes a case of laminitis.

There are more obese horses and ponies than ever and a new problem is being seen by vets, Equine Metabolic Syndrome or Peripheral Cushing's disease, where the fat produces chemicals into the bloodstream causing a condition similar to humans diabetes – and this too can cause chronic laminitis.

Once a horse has had laminitis he will always be susceptible, the older horse more so. Allowing your horse or especially pony to get laminitis solely through being overweight is poor management and causes much unnecessary suffering. Managing a laminitic is hard work and is for the life of the pony.

### Prevention

- If the pony gains weight easily in the summer, make sure it loses it over the winter. This is what their bodies were designed to do. Do not let them get too fat in the summer.
- Be aware of when grass is most high in dangerous sugars, and limit intake
- Try to use pasture that is not designed for cattle and sheep and therefore high in ryegrasses and clover
- Do not feed cereal feeds especially to the older horse; their systems become less able to deal with the high levels of starch
- Instead supplement with hay or low calorie alfalfa chaff if necessary
- Worm count to make sure your worming programme is effective
- Be aware of the signs of Cushing's disease
- Make sure the horse is exercised appropriately

## Good nutrition

Adapting nutrition is the key factor in maintaining the health of the aged horse. Advancing years will affect a horse's ability to chew and digest, therefore feeds that are easy to chew, highly digestible and made with top-quality ingredients should be provided. As they get older horses cannot digest cereals, and this can trigger other problems such as laminitis.

## Causes of loss of condition

The two main causes of loss of condition are poor teeth and reduced digestive ability. These two factors are linked, as the horse must be able to thoroughly chew his feed for proper digestion to proceed in the intestinal tract. An examination of a horse's droppings can assist in identifying if a horse has a digestive problem; the presence of noticeable amounts of grain and much unchewed hay in dung is a clue that much of the horse's feed may be passing through its system without it being fully utilised.

A suitable worming programme, as recommended by a veterinary surgeon, is essential, combined with good pasture management.

On the other hand, the older horse should not be allowed to become too fat, as obesity can aggravate arthritis, lead to laminitis (founder), and stress the cardiovascular system. The older horse will be more susceptible to laminitis.

Beware of allowing pads of fat to build up especially on the neck.

## Cushing's disease and laminitis

Sadly laminitis is all too common in native breeds and crosses in the UK – see the pet care leaflet, Laminitis (H14).

Unfortunately as horses and ponies get older they become more susceptible to laminitis. One reason is the increased likelihood of the pituitary gland in the brain developing a tumour, leading to a disease known as Cushing's disease.

The signs of this are:

- lethargy and depression
- pronounced localised fat pads on the shoulders, rump and above the eyes
- growing a thick, coarse, curly coat which does not shed in the summer
- excessive drinking, sweating, and urinating
- a much higher susceptibility to laminitis

There are commercial feeds available specifically formulated to suit the older horse. It is extremely important that the best quality of forage (hay) is fed. It should be clean and dust-free, and a mix of meadow grasses rather than seed hay may prove more palatable for the older animal or those with digestive problems.

Seek advice from an horse nutritionist who will guide you towards safe feeding for the older horse.



## Foot care

Older horses require regular attention to their feet to ensure that the foot remains balanced and healthy. An unbalanced hoof that is allowed to grow too long between trimming, can put additional strain or distortion on the leg joints and

exacerbate progressively degenerative conditions. Older feet can grow more slowly; be careful not to get caught out and let them get unbalanced.

It is equally important to pick the feet out regularly to ensure the frog remains clean and free from infection, which the older horse will not fight off as effectively. Older horses may be stiffer in the limbs and care should be taken not to try to lift the legs too high when picking out the feet. Your farrier should appreciate this when trimming and shoeing.



## Tooth problems

A horse's teeth are vital to effective digestion and health. In the older horse, tooth problems can limit the horse's ability to chew. Front (incisor) teeth meet at an increased angle and may become long, and unevenly worn and eventually wear

## Importance of appropriate exercise for older horses and ponies

Daily turnout as a form of exercise is a bare minimum of the horse's requirements. For a non-ridden horse who does not 'work' it is essential for his circulation and gut health that he moves around as much as possible. It is just as important for his quality of life, where his mental stimulation and socialising needs must be met. The retired competition horse especially will miss a busy life, some appear depressed when they stop ridden work and it is essential to give them a routine to fill the void until they relax into retirement. Many will enjoy accompanying a young or green horse to events.

down to the gums. This can affect an older horse's ability to graze effectively, particularly on short grass, or to pull hay from a hay net. Molars can become loose and fall out reducing grinding ability.

Hay should be fed soaked to increase its palatability and it is best fed from a pile at ground level.

Broken teeth and root abscesses are also more common in older horses. Bad breath can be a sign of food collecting in the gaps between ageing teeth, this too can lead to infection therefore older horses should have their teeth checked regularly – every six to 12 months by a veterinary surgeon or veterinary approved dental technician. The cost of good dental care is easily recouped in improved health and savings in feed costs.





## Ridden work

If lameness does not stop work, it is generally accepted that continuing the right level of exercise is best for the horse as it is for people. With the help of your vet, monitor the ability and enthusiasm of your horse for its job. Some will show signs of physical age before others; many factors will affect this, from the quality of nutrition at an early age to the amount of work done and genetic make-up. Many horses continue into their 20s performing well. Usually this is as a result of good previous management plus care and consideration as they get older.

### Things to consider:

- Keeping work regular – it would be harder for an older horse to just be ridden at weekends
- Reducing one, and eventually all of the following factors: speed of work, height of fences, the level of schooling, weight of rider, length of time ridden. This will help prevent the horse struggling and/or becoming lame.
- Varying the work too will keep him enthusiastic. Allowing time for warm up and cool down work and avoiding hard or deep going will prolong his working life.
- If a horse shows mild signs of lameness when competing, in consultation with the vet he may be able to enjoy a hacking career for many more years

- Remember to keep an eye on the fit of the saddle. As the horse loses muscle the saddle will sit lower and will need adjusting by your saddler.

## Therapy

There are many forms of complementary therapy available today which can ease symptoms of age. Remember they cannot cure disease and should never be used in preference to good veterinary care. However the older horse will probably enjoy treatments and a trained physiotherapist will be able to give you stretching exercises and identify specific areas that need extra care.

## Related Blue Cross publications

The following leaflets from the pet care series may be useful.

- The field-kept horse (H5)
- Feeding and watering (H7)
- Common ailments (H12)
- Laminitis (H14)
- Care of the companion horse (H19)
- Euthanasia (H21)

# Happy, healthy pets

**Blue Cross** advice leaflets are packed full of top tips to help owners with their pet questions. They cover a wide range of topics, from training a puppy to caring for an older cat. So if you need some support to help you with a pet problem, whether it's about a dog or a degu, we're here for you.

You can read and download our leaflets online at [www.bluecross.org.uk](http://www.bluecross.org.uk)

**Visit our website to take advantage of all its features, including:**

- blog posts from Blue Cross experts
- latest news
- events near you
- pets needing new homes

**Or you can join in the chat on our online communities. Find us on Twitter and Facebook – just search for Blue Cross.**



## Blue Cross

Blue Cross has been dedicated to the health and happiness of pets since 1897. Abandoned or unwanted, ill or injured – we do what's needed to give every pet a healthy life in a happy home. We're a charity, so the more help you give us, the more help we can give pets.

## How you can help

Blue Cross doesn't receive any government funding, so we rely on the generosity of pet lovers like you. There are lots of ways you can help the sick, injured and abandoned pets in our care, like making a donation, fundraising for us or leaving us a legacy.

**Please call us on 0300 777 1897 or visit [www.bluecross.org.uk](http://www.bluecross.org.uk)**



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