

Horses are Living Longer Lives

Thanks largely to progress in veterinary medicine and a better understanding of nutrition, horses can remain healthy and sound well into their late teens and early twenties. A 12-year-old horse is still in his prime, and it is not uncommon today for horses to live to be 30 or older. However, like an older person, an elderly horse needs extra care to remain healthy. Owners are responsible for ensuring their animals receive the necessary food, water, shelter, and care to keep them in good shape no matter their age. When a horse's failing health prevents living without undue suffering, it is the owner's responsibility to have the animal humanely euthanized.

How Is Looking After an Old Horse Different From Caring For Other Horses?

As a horse ages, his bodily functions become less efficient. His teeth may deteriorate to the point where he can't graze properly or chew hay. He may be arthritic. With less fat cover, he has more trouble keeping warm. Such things as good shelter, routine worming, and regular dental care, which were all important when the horse was in his prime, now become vital.

Feeding Several Horses

Horses have a strong social order and the top horses will take more than their share. To give your old horse a chance, spread the hay out with one more pile than the number of horses. If you can't physically separate horses to feed the grain ration, use separate feeders spaced wide apart.

The vision of the Alberta SPCA is that every animal in Alberta be treated humanely.

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CARING FOR AN ELDERLY HORSE



FEEDING AN ELDERLY HORSE

Pasture

The most natural food for a horse is good quality pasture. Most mature, pleasure horses doing light work will do well on pasture if they have sufficient grazing. However, the teeth of older horses often prevent them from grazing effectively. If a horse can't keep weight on when out on pasture, he will need supplemental feed.



Water

Fresh water is vital for all horses since they drink from five to ten gallons per day. Clean water should be available at all times.

While some horses may survive on snow in the winter, this is far from ideal. The horse's body heat needs to melt a lot of snow to get enough water, thus using up valuable food energy. An old horse cannot afford to waste that energy.

A horse that is not getting enough water is also susceptible to impaction colic. An inexpensive stock tank heater can keep the water trough ice free in winter.

Shelter

Remember, your horse is now a senior citizen. He needs protection from wind and precipitation. A dry, three-sided shelter bedded with straw is a good choice. Older horses may need to be brought into a barn during severe weather.

Hay

Hay is the basic food of domestic horses. Because an old horse's digestive system might not work as efficiently as it used to, good quality hay is a must. Inspect hay carefully before buying it. Bales should be green and free of dust and mould. Feeding mouldy hay can cause colic, and dusty hay can cause respiratory problems. To avoid dust, it's a good idea to pull the flakes apart and shake them out well before feeding. As a precaution, you can also soak hay before feeding.

Three common types of hay available in Alberta are grass hay, alfalfa, and grass/alfalfa mix. Alfalfa has a higher protein content. Many people consider a grass/alfalfa mix the best. Alfalfa is also available in cubes and pellets. However, horses need chew time to be content so most people feed some hay. For an old horse that doesn't have good enough teeth to chew properly, pellets softened in water are a good alternative. Do not feed grass clippings as there's a risk of choking and the chance it can result in founder.

How Much to Feed

As a general rule, a horse needs 2 to 2.5 pounds of feed for every 100 pounds of body weight (you can buy a weight tape to measure how much your horse weighs). For example, an average 1,000 pound horse needs 20 to 25 pounds of feed per day. Most of that should be hay unless your old horse is eating complete feed pellets. The amount of food a horse needs will depend on such things as size, breed, age, and activity level. In cold weather, a horse living outside needs extra food to maintain warmth.

Frequency

The basic rule for feeding horses is to feed little and often. The more meals you can split the day's feed into, the better for the horse. Keep a regular schedule. For practical reasons, most people feed two or three times per day.

Concentrates

Hay alone cannot provide enough nutrition for hard-working horses, pregnant and nursing mares, or growing youngsters. Many old horses also need concentrates to supplement their hay.

Concentrates include grains (whole, rolled, or cracked), sweet feed (grain mixed with molasses), and manufactured feeds (pellets, cubes, or extruded). You can buy bags of feed specially formulated for every stage of a horse's life from creep feed for foals to feed for senior equines. Often, an old horse will do better on complete feed pellets than on hay and grain.



Dental Care

The way horses chew often wears their teeth unevenly. Most need their teeth "floated" by a veterinarian once a year (filing the sharp points that form on the molars). If teeth aren't floated regularly, the inside of the mouth can become cut and sore making eating difficult. The teeth of old horses can become so worn they can't bite off grass or chew properly. Lost or broken teeth can also cause problems for an old horse.