

Feeding the Aged Horse

By Dr John Kohnke BVSc RDA

The aging process in horses usually occurs over a period of years. Some horses appear old at 12 years of age, others are still active up to 25 years or older. **Poor teeth, or loss of teeth, are the most common problems which affect feeding efficiency and well-being in an aged horse, with up to 33% of aged horses declining in health and passing away because of poor teeth and secondary septicaemia from infected teeth and gums.**

An aged horse in retirement at pasture may fall away in condition during winter or summer when pasture is very succulent or sparse, despite adequate shelter and supplementary hay. Unfortunately, once an aged horse loses condition, it is often difficult to regain the weight, even on a higher energy ration.

Common Causes for Weight Loss or Ill Health

In most cases, an aged horse will have lost some teeth, reducing its ability to chew grains and long stemmed hay. A horse which has been kept on sandy areas, or one which 'windsucks' on fences, will wear its teeth down more quickly. It may start to show the effects of poor teeth at an early age. **Poor teeth condition can lead to increased risk of colic and digestive problems in an older horse.**

- It is a good idea to carefully observe an aged horse when eating for signs of teeth problems - such as dropping feed ('quidding'), slow chewing and slobbering when eating, and passing grain or long straws in the droppings.
- Pain and discomfort from arthritis and earlier injuries may restrict grazing and adversely affect the horse's appetite and ability to walk to harvest its own feed.
- Heavy worm burdens can develop as a horse's immunity wanes with increasing age and, combined with poor teeth, may cause ill-thrift and loss of condition. Worm older horses every 6-8 weeks and adopt strict pasture hygiene to reduce worm egg and larval ingestion during grazing. Refer to Fact Sheet M9 for recommendations on worm control.

As a horse ages, its digestive efficiency also decreases and it will generally require more energy for everyday activities, such as walking, grazing and maintaining itself. An aged horse requires higher levels of good quality protein, as well as increased amounts of calcium and phosphorus, in its ration as compared to a younger adult horse under similar conditions because digestion of these nutrients becomes less efficient as horses age past 16 years of age. The energy density and protein quality of the ration should be increased to maintain vitality, ability to exercise and a reasonable body condition, especially during cold weather or over winter. Often pasture is not adequate to maintain condition and a hard feed at least once daily may need to be provided.

- Arrange with your vet to check the teeth of an aged horse every 3-6 months, and correct any problems, such as stepped mouth, which may interfere with chewing and therefore directly affect the efficiency of feed utilisation.

Handy Hint

Check Teeth on a Regular basis

Arrange with your vet to check the teeth of an aged horse every 3-6 months, and correct any problems, such as stepped mouth, which may interfere with chewing and therefore directly affect the efficiency of feed utilisation. Some veterinarians and specialist certified equine dentists remove all the teeth in an aged horse, and recommend a chaff and pellet or extruded/micronized diet which requires minimal chewing.

Basic Ration

Often an aged horse will put on weight and do better when given a completely pelleted or extruded ration. Ideally, the processed feed should contain 14% crude protein, 0.4% calcium and 0.3% phosphorus to help maintain condition and adequate mineral intake.

- Approximately 750g-1kg of 14% crude protein pellets or extruded feed per 100kg body weight mixed with twice its volume of chaff should meet needs at rest, with adjustments to maintain condition as required. If the pellets are hard to chew, and are being wasted due to 'quidding' from poor teeth, they may be softened with 50mL of 50:50 molasses and water mixture per kilogram of pellets or 50mL of apple cider vinegar and water mix just prior to feeding. A daily Omega oil supplement, such as 15 mL/100kg body weight of **Kohnke's Own Energy Gold™** (with Vitamin E and garlic flavouring) will help improve coat condition and maintain the appetite. An increased dose can be given to boost energy intake. See Handy Hint below.
- Good quality, preferably dampened hay, should be provided. Leafy lucerne hay is preferred because it has a higher protein content and more available calcium, the 2 nutrients which are required in increased amounts in an aged horse. However, too much lucerne may cause low grade diarrhoea because it does not hold as much water in its structure and therefore there is more free water to be passed in the droppings.
- In an aged horse with poor teeth, lucerne chaff mixed in with the concentrate to increase bulk, should be provided on an ad-lib basis if the animal is unable to chew hay efficiently.
- Alternatively, a home-mixed concentrate feed of 0.5-0.75 kg per 100 kg body weight of crushed oats (or steamed rolled barley), 100g full fat soyabean meal per 100 kg body weight, mixed with double its volume of lucerne chaff, all dampened with molasses and water, is a suitable basic ration when split into 2 feeds. A good quality commercial working horse mix or sweet feed can be given, provided that the grain has been processed to make it easy to chew and more digestible. An extruded feed is usually well digested in an aged horse, but may be more expensive to purchase.
- If the aged horse has access to good quality pasture, a night feed containing damp crushed grain or pellets, boiled barley, or whole grain soak mixed with 5% wheat bran for phosphorus, is easier to chew and better utilised in an old horse with poor teeth.

Handy Hint

Dampen to Soften Hay

A portion of good quality leafy lucerne hay, dampened by placing each biscuit in a polywoven chaff bag and spraying it with clean (preferably warm) water and letting it soak for 15-20 minutes will help soften the hay, facilitate chewing and reduce dust and waste when pasture is dry or sparse. Additional fat, such as **Energy-Gold™** may be added at a rate of 30-60mL/100kg body weight to boost energy density, but larger amounts may not be well utilised and may cause mild diarrhoea in an old horse.

Unfortunately, many very aged horses develop a terminal form of low grade chronic diarrhoea, perhaps due to loss of gut absorption or reduced digestive action, and so fall away in condition. Avoid large amounts of hay as it may bulk out the digestive system and reduce the digestion of the hard feed.

- Where an aged horse has access to good pasture, but is unable to graze effectively due to poor teeth or arthritis, then about 2kg fresh grass daily as green feed will help digestion and appetite. Alternatively, mow small areas every 2-3 days to dry out as soft wilted grass hay on the top of the pasture. However, do not feed grass cut up finely with a lawn mower, as there is a high risk of mould overheating the clippings, resulting in colic and serious digestive upset.
- Often an aged horse in a group of other horses will be bossed away from feeders by younger, more aggressive horses. Place a feed bin away from the group and encourage the aged horse to eat by itself, or bring it into a yard to feed, so it has more time to slowly and peacefully chew and consume its feed.

Supplements

The night feed may be supplemented with a vitamin/mineral supplement, such as **Kohnke's Own Cell-Provide®** to provide additional vitamins and minerals to aid general vitality and coat condition.

In an aged horse over 16 years of age, the ability to absorb calcium (and phosphorus) is reduced. If it is being fed less than 0.5 lucerne per 100kg body weight daily, then a calcium supplement as **Kohnke's Own Cell-Osteo® pellets**, or **Kohnke's Own CAL-Xtra™ powder**, should be added to the ration to provide calcium and phosphorus.

Where pain and discomfort is caused by arthritis, your vet may prescribe medication to reduce pain and enable the horse to lead a more comfortable life. A daily joint supplement, such as **Kohnke's Own Nutricart®** may assist joint health and function and help an aged horse exercise and maintain an active lifestyle.

Handy Hint

Add additional Energy Feed during Cold Weather

During cold weather, add an extra 200g per 100 kg body weight wet weight of boiled barley or 500-750g/100 kg body weight of extruded feed to the night meal and provide extra chaff or dampened hay for roughage. Ensure the horse is double rugged or covered with a heat reflected insulated rug, or stabled overnight where possible to reduce heat loss under cold conditions. Loss of body weight is difficult to regain as a horse ages.

Handy Hint

If an aged horse is a 'windsucker' or has a poor appetite, then a daily feed supplement of **Kohnke's Own Gastro-Coat®** given as directed, may help to maintain the appetite and interest in feed.

Handy Hint

Weekly evaluation of condition, pasture value and monitoring grazing time, combined with regular worming and teeth checks, will help ensure that an aged horse is able to maintain itself in a healthy condition. Always ensure the hooves are well maintained to enable the horse to move around and regularly groom the horse's coat, mane and tail to remove loose hair and caked dirt.



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