



ELDERLY HORSE MANAGEMENT

Veterinary medicine is constantly changing and presenting us with new challenges. As veterinarians, we now regularly see horses living not just into their 20's, but into their 30's, and these elderly patients require some specialized veterinary care. In particular we frequently see problems arising in older horses during the cold winter months. Our goal with geriatric horse medicine is to prevent or control problems before they become emergencies, particularly mid-winter ones.

Geriatric horse medicine includes four main components of care that you and your veterinarian can coordinate for your older horse:

- 1.) Wellness care, including yearly exams, deworming and vaccinations.
- 2.) Testing for and management of equine metabolic conditions common in older horses.
- 3.) Routine dental care and appropriate feeding.
- 4.) Regular hoof care.

1. Wellness care of older horses should include a thorough annual physical exam. Such an exam will help detect or monitor common geriatric conditions such as heart murmurs or arrhythmias, respiratory issues such as COPD or heaves, as well as lameness or arthritis problems. By regularly evaluating your horse we can be most effective in managing these conditions. A complete wellness program should include a targeted deworming based on routine fecal egg counts to maximize the effectiveness and efficiency of your worming program. Finally, regular vaccinations are critically important in older horses even if they no longer travel or compete; older horses' immune systems are less robust making them more susceptible to disease.

2. We commonly see Equine Metabolic Syndrome and Equine Cushing's Syndrome in teenage and elder horses, especially in ponies and warmbloods. These conditions can lead to a wide spectrum of clinical problems caused by an imbalance of insulin and hormones. It is important to test for these diseases and initiate appropriate treatment as early as possible in order to minimize or prevent these potential consequences. Long haircoat that does not properly shed out, a loss of muscle and increased body fat, an increased susceptibility to infection, slow wound healing, increased drinking and urination, and laminitis (founder). Simple blood tests are available that allow us to screen for both Equine Metabolic Syndrome and Cushing's Syndrome.



3. Routine dental care is important in all horses because horse teeth, unlike ours, grow continuously throughout the horse's lifetime. Horses therefore can grow hooks and sharp points where their teeth do not align perfectly. Older horses need additional dental care to check for loose teeth and tooth root infections. Undiagnosed and untreated dental problems can cause a horse to lose weight or to develop infection of the sinuses that directly communicate with the maxillary teeth roots. Such infections are often particularly difficult to treat.

4. Older horses need appropriate feeding and nutrition, particularly in the winter when many of their calories are used to stay warm (see sidebar).

5. Finally, regular hoof care is critical to an older horse's well-being, even if the older horse no longer wears shoes. Your farrier will be the most important element in this aspect of horse care. Our veterinarians frequently work with farriers on difficult cases in geriatric individuals involving laminitis or chronic abscesses or even an arthritic older horse that becomes tricky to shoe or trim. In these situations, we can provide your farrier with the additional tools of radiographic guidance, sedation and pain control.



Our ambition with geriatric horse medicine is to detect and address problems earlier rather than later. We want to provide you with the tools to keep your older horse comfortable and happy. Please contact our veterinarians about developing a comprehensive yearly plan for your elderly horse or pony.

Feeding & Nutrition of the Elderly Horse

As horses age, their diets may need modification to help each individual maintain good health and body condition.

Dentition: Forages and feeds that can be soaked into a mash may be required in some cases for the senior horse to take in adequate calories.

Nutrient Absorption: As horses age, some horses may become less able to derive nutrients from what they eat. In these cases, a more-digestible fiber and more concentrated nutrition may be required.

Cold Weather Considerations: All horses will burn more calories during the winter staying warm. High-quality fiber in the form of hay (if they can eat it), soaked hay cubes or pellets, and beet pulp all work well. If a senior horse's fiber intake from forage is limited, commercial senior feeds work well and can be used as a total ration replacement if necessary.

Overweight Horses: Not all senior horses are underweight; some will hold their weight easily and become susceptible to lameness conditions such as arthritis. Senior horses should continue to exercise as their soundness allows, and ample turnout time to maintain muscle tone and body condition is important.

Metabolic Syndrome/Cushing's Disease: Metabolic syndrome and Cushing's disease are two separate conditions but are often found to occur together. Calorie sources, carbohydrate and fat content of the ration and micronutrient balance must all be considered carefully. Feeding one or both of these conditions can be complicated and should be managed and directed by a veterinarian and nutritionist.



Article written by Dr. Laura Faulkner

Dr. Faulkner obtained her VMD from the University of Pennsylvania in 2011 after graduating from Stanford University with a degree in political science. Following an internship in ambulatory medicine and hospital work and a fellowship at the New Bolton Center (Pennsylvania) in ultrasound and cardiology, Dr. Faulkner joined the team at Miller & Associates in July of 2013. Dr. Faulkner's practice with Miller & Associates focuses on sport horse medicine with an emphasis on imaging.