

Feeding the Older Horse

As horses get older, their nutrient requirements may change. This can be due to poor teeth, changes in metabolism, or to a less efficient digestive system. Some horses may lose weight. Others may become prone to laminitis and other problems due to Cushings, for instance, and need to be on a special diet.

Kathleen Crandell, PhD (Senior Research Associate at the MARE Center in Middleburg, Virginia), says that in addressing the feed needs of the older horse, first we need to define what we mean by old. Horses, like humans, age at different rates. You can't just cite a number and say that horses past a certain age fall into the "old" category. "When you have to start changing the way you feed a horse, to enable him to maintain proper weight, that's when I would consider that horse to be a geriatric or senior horse." When the body starts to change—whatever is affecting it—that's when you need to reconsider the diet, she says.

One of the biggest issues with an older horse that is not keeping his weight is that he's not getting enough fiber. "This can be due to teeth problems. The biting surface may have changed and become wavy, or the horse has lost teeth and can no longer grind forage properly. You might have a horse that does fine on green grass, until you have to feed hay during winter." He can't chew the hay as easily as the softer green grass.

This is when he needs alternative forages, like hay cubes or chopped forages—something in which some of the break-down process has already been started, so the teeth don't have to do it all. Ultimately, some of those horses will need pellets—containing feed that is already ground and doesn't really need much chewing at all.

"There are benefits in using chopped hay or hay cubes, since there is still a little bit of length in that material, which has a beneficial effect on the digestive tract, helping it function more normally than it does with the finely ground material in pellets." If a horse's teeth are so bad that you must resort to pellets, you should

probably soak them in water so they become a mash and fall apart, becoming very easy to eat and also decreasing the risk of choke, she says.

"You might make a mash using hay pellets and possibly add some other things to it, like wheat bran or senior feeds. Senior feeds alone may not be enough. Forages are the most important thing in a horse's diet, and some of the senior feeds are more like a supplement that can be added," says Crandell.

Many senior feeds have tried to incorporate some of the forage needed by the horse and these feeds are quite different from some of the other supplements. "If you look at a concentrate feed for race horses, for instance, you'll find



The older horse's nutrient requirements may change.

they are mostly starch; the senior feed has more fiber—maybe as much as 20 to 30 percent. It might contain alfalfa meal, beet pulp or some other high fiber source. If you look at the label on a senior feed you'll find it's usually more than 15 percent crude fiber," she says. It's meant to provide more of the total ration than normal grain concentrates.

Due to this factor, feeding rate is also important. If it's meant to be a total ration, to replace all or part of the forage, it can't contain minerals in a high concentration because you need to feed more—and you don't want to overdo the minerals. A lot of people might think that if they're feeding a pound or two of senior feed, they are fortifying the horse's diet with necessary vitamins and minerals, but they are not; the recommended feeding rate for that senior feed might be 8 or more pounds a day. The feeding rate will be on the bag or tag. A senior feed can be fed with

additional chopped hay, or cubes, or additional hay or grass, but you should read the tag to know how a particular product should be fed. They are not all the same.

"If the older horse is losing weight and it's not just a dental issue, it may be a metabolic problem or a kidney or liver problem," says Crandell. Have your vet check the horse to make a proper diagnosis. If it's just a matter of not being able to chew the roughage, you can feed more—and feed it in a form the horse can more easily chew.

Sometimes cumulative damage from worms may make the digestive tract less efficient at absorbing nutrients. "After a certain point there may not be as much functional tissue. The horse may be able to keep up his weight if you simply offer more feed," says Crandell. But if it's a metabolic problem the horse may need a different type of diet.

If the horse just has trouble utilizing his feed, senior feeds or high fiber "complete" feeds that are already chopped (in cube form) can be helpful. "If it's a weight issue, a high fat/high fiber feed can help supply the needed calories. But if a horse has liver problems, you can't feed a high fat diet," explains Crandell.

A thorough health examination (and a blood panel) is always wise if a horse starts losing weight—rather than just adding vegetable oil to the grain, or more grain to the diet. Cushings is also a fairly common problem in the older horse, and might also require specific changes in the diet. Those horses become prone to laminitis and you need to reduce the amount of starch and sugars in the ration, or lush spring grass.

THE NEW NRC GUIDELINES - It's been 18 years since the last edition of the National Research Council's Nutritional Requirements of Horses was published in 1989, and the updated 6th edition has just been released. Brian Nielsen, PhD (Michigan State University) did some of the research for the new version and says it has a few changes in feeding recommendations.

"The old NRC talked about feeds in concentration basis (such as percent of the diet), but in this version we've gone away from this basis," he says. This will be a big change in how we think of diet, in terms of how much protein, fat, etc., should be there. The new recommendations look at feeding rates in terms of how much to feed per pound of body weight of the horse. "This is quite simple," says Nielsen. "You just multiply the nutrient requirement by the

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weight of the individual horse.

"The new version is a huge document, but a lot of the changes are not that dramatic. There are some changes, however, in feeding the older horse. We had many discussions regarding older horses, including definition. The term geriatric implies there are health issues. Some people use the terms old age and geriatric as though they are the same thing, but they are not. Geriatric refers to diseases of the aged horse," explains Nielsen. An older horse often does have health issues, but by contrast you could have a horse in his 30's that's fat and sassy and doing fine on a regular diet. Often there isn't any difference in nutritional requirements for an older horse, but there are some that do need special feeds.

A couple of studies showed there may be potential for some decrease in fiber digestibility in older horses, but there has not been enough work done that really proves this, says Nielsen. "So we didn't make any major recommendations for that. I know there are a lot of people who would like to have seen more details and guidelines, but the committee was adamant about not making any recommendations we can't back up with

evidence," he says.

"We have to be careful, because many times this document is used in legal cases. In talking about body condition scoring, for instance, there are very few times you'd want to see a horse below body condition score 5. You don't want to see the ribs on a horse. But you might have a case where a horse has chronic founder and it's not healthy for him to carry extra weight, and then you might justify it. Another thing we don't want to imply is that a horse is not being taken care of properly or fed well enough if he's under a score of 5," says Nielsen. Body condition is scored 1 to 9, with 1 being emaciated and 9 being obese. A 35 year old horse might be a body score 4, yet the owner is doing as well as can be done, to keep the horse at that weight; the horse is doing as well as possible.

In most instances, the earlier recommendations still hold true for the older horse, according to Nielsen, though the new document also discusses feeding behavior and general considerations for feeding management. The new guidelines have different maintenance requirements than the previous version. The idea behind this change is that not all horses have the

same maintenance requirements, even before you add exercise. Some horses are easy keepers and some are harder to keep weight on. Much of this is due to the activity the horse is doing on his own. The hard keeper may be one that's a little more active and less placid, and as a result there are some differences in energy requirements, says Nielsen.

"We categorize these as minimum, average and elevated, and the nice thing about determining energy requirements is that you can look at the horse and get a good idea whether you are meeting those requirements—by using body condition scoring," he says.

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