

Tacoma Equine Hospital

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Is Senior Feed Right for Your Horse?

By Mandy Tennert, LVT

Different horses have different nutritional needs. Some may be in the growth stages, some may have high activity levels, and others may fall somewhere in between. They each have specific nutrient requirements, such as energy, protein, amino acids, vitamins, and minerals. When discussing a complete balanced diet for the senior horse, certain requirements need to be met. A complete feed that furnishes optimum nutrition for the older horse's less efficient metabolic system is important to think about.

Many horses these days are living well into their late twenties and thirties, and doing so with good quality of life. Special feeds have been formulated to meet the unique nutritional needs of older horses and extend their productive lives. These "senior" feeds are highly palatable, dust free, easy to digest, high in fiber, and contain 12 to 14 percent crude protein, added B vitamins, vitamin C and fat. Most senior feeds are in preprocessed grain and alfalfa pellet feed forms, which are easy to chew, swallow and digest. Fat is a concentrated source of calories, containing more than twice the calories per unit than carbohydrates. Polyunsaturated vegetable fats, rice bran or soybean are the preferred forms of fat for the horse. These types of fat also improve skin and hair coat and is an alternative energy source for older horses with problematic glucose metabolic systems. Wheat bran or beet pulp is added as a good source of fiber for bulk.

Higher amounts of protein (14%) are added for aged horses, since they have a reduced digestion of protein. Vitamin C is added since older horses show lower levels of it in their blood. Vitamin C is also important for metabolic functions. Added Vitamins of B-12, Biotin, Folic Acid, Copper, and Zinc are components that provide nutrients needed for blood formation in older horses, which may suffer from anemia. The adjusted mineral balance is added for optimum calcium and phosphorus levels and ratios (1.5 to 1) for older horses.

Senior feeds are consumed at higher amounts than conventional horse feeds. They are designed to replace most or all of the hay or pasture that the horse would normally consume. That's the reason they are called "complete": they contain enough fiber that they can be fed as the sole diet.

Many older horses may be affected by Cushing's disease, which alters normal cortisol and glucose metabolism and increases the incidence of laminitis. Senior feeds have low amounts of sugar and starch, which could improve glucose and insulin metabolism and reduce the risk of laminitis in horses with Cushing's disease.

It is important to provide high quality forage for your older horse as well. Poor quality hay is more difficult for the older horse to chew and swallow, and is more likely to cause impaction colic. High quality hay is harvested at an earlier stage, is less fibrous and easier to

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chew, and since it breaks down quickly in the horse's digestive system, it reduces the risk of impaction colic. Providing forage to an older horse, even if they can't consume it efficiently, may possibly decrease the ingestion of sand and boredom during the day.

As much as nutrition is important for your older horse, so is dental care. In order for your senior horse to chew and gain nutrients from their food, their dental needs must be addressed.

Veterinarians have come a long way from just using hand tools to float horses teeth, they now use an electric drill machine to grind down the sharp points and do corrective dental work. A yearly physical exam from your veterinarian is important to ensure the health of your senior horse as well.

So if your senior horse seems to be losing weight or if you are concerned about insufficient amounts of nutrients being consumed by your senior horse, then a complete senior feed would be something to consider for your old friend.