

Tacoma Equine Hospital

3112 – 156th Street E. Tacoma, WA 98446 ♦ 253.535.6999

SPECIAL CARE FOR THE OLDER HORSE

Who in your barn is an “older” horse?

In general, the average life span for a horse today is 25 years. However, horses who endure significant hardship, poor nutrition or inappropriate health care can age prematurely. Some horses, including ponies, Arabians and Quarter Horses, can live well into their 30's or even 40's. Our practice considers all horses from 20 years +, an “older” horse.

You as a horse owner can make a significant difference in the health and happiness of your older horse. There are several things to consider:

FEEDING THE GERIATRIC HORSE

- Probably the single most important aspect of geriatric care is proper nutrition. A horse's protein and energy requirements vary with age, workload, and metabolism. How horses receive and burn calories differs as they age. The aging digestive system is not as efficient as it once was. Older gastrointestinal tracts may require easy to digest food to ensure they are receiving the nutrients required for health and well being. In addition, older horses may have a decreased ability to digest fiber. There are several feeds formulated for the geriatric horse. Feeding superior quality feedstuffs, pre-digested feeds or extruded feeds may aid in feed digestibility. Several feed companies have specially formulated equine senior feed to ensure a balanced ration for the older horse. If your senior horse is appearing healthy and in good body weight you likely do not need to alter the diet.
- As horses age they have decreased salivary excretion and esophageal function. These contribute to the increased risk of choke. Ensure access to clean, fresh water and unfrozen water in the winter. There are several devices available to keep your water from freezing. If your horse is not drinking enough water, soak your feed in 1-2 gallons of water to increase fluid intake. This is especially important in senior horses as they have an increased risk of impaction colic, which is strongly correlated to inadequate water consumption.
- Consider adding vegetable oil daily to improve and maintain optimal body condition. Ensure that additions are made slowly, increasing over 2 - 3 weeks to provide 1 – 2 cups daily.

SHELTER FOR THE GERIATRIC HORSE

- Environmental stresses such as wind, wet and cold are more difficult for older horses to endure. As with people, cold and damp weather makes arthritis pain even worse. Ideally, provide a combination of free turnout with shelter from the wind and rain. Run-in shelters are cost effective and low maintenance. Water resistant, breathable turnout blankets are great, but ensure they are checked twice a day for proper fit and damage. Barns are comfortable and helpful in stressful weather, but please make sure there is adequate flow of clean fresh air. Respiratory tract infections and chronic obstructive

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pulmonary disease (heaves) are more common in the aged, thus air quality is very important.

HUSBANDRY CARE FOR THE GERIATRIC HORSE

- In general, owners of older horses often have developed a bond similar to companion animals. Continued contact with your older horse enhances health and quality of life. Some horses do very well with continued riding at a lower level of activity. They enjoy the attention and it seems to give them purpose. If your horse is unable to be ridden, regular grooming and hand walking will ensure maintaining a healthy bond and careful assessment of well being.

VETERINARY HEALTH CARE FOR THE GERIATRIC HORSE

- Physical exams including dental exams should be performed at least once a year. Just as other body parts wear out so do the teeth. Some older horses require veterinary dental exams and floating twice a year. Long incisors, broken, missing, sharp or pointed teeth are common and require a thorough dental exam and dentistry. When possible, dental corrections can be made however, to avoid overcorrection, sequential dental exams may be required (every three months for two to four visits.) Healthy teeth are very important to ensure proper chewing of grass or hay, and the ability to swallow completely and digest it. Soaking an equine senior feed in water and making a mash just prior to feeding is very helpful for older horses that have difficulty chewing. Choke is found to be more common in the geriatric both due to chewing problems and decreased water consumption.
- Blood work including, a complete blood count and serum biochemistry should be considered during physical exams with geriatrics. In general the oxygen carrying capacity of red blood cells is less efficient. White blood cells and the corresponding immune system are not as reliable in older horses, making them more susceptible to illness and slower to recover. Vitamin C has been shown to have a positive effect on the immune system therefore supplementing with vitamin C (5 -10 grams) and an anti-oxidant vitamin E (4000IU/day) may be of value in the geriatric horse. Vaccination is advised to stimulate the immune system against harmful pathogens.
- Hormonal changes can affect overall body condition, hair growth, appetite and energy levels. Pituitary adenoma (resulting in Cushing's disease) is much more common in horses and ponies as they age. In general a long hair coat and increased risk of laminitis occurs. Concurrent glucose intolerance can occur; therefore avoiding sweet feed (>3% molasses) is imperative. Providing specific nutrition is essential to limit complications such as laminitis in older Cushing's horses, so consider a specially formulated feed.
- Bones and joints are less resilient as a horse gets older. Aged horses often feel the aches and pain of arthritis. This is most likely due to stiffer and more brittle cartilage. There are excellent joint supplements that can provide the building blocks for healthy joints and cartilage.

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In Summary:

TEN TIPS FOR CARING FOR THE OLDER HORSE:

(as presented by the American Association of Equine Practitioners)

1. Observe your horse on a regular basis. Watch for changes in body condition, behavior and attitude.
2. Feed your older horse away from younger, more aggressive ones so it won't have to compete for food.
3. Adjust and balance rations to maintain proper body conditions.
4. Arrange for routine dental care to keep their mouth in good working order.
5. Provide adequate, appropriate exercise to maintain muscle tone, flexibility and mobility.
6. Groom your horse frequently to promote circulation and skin health.
7. Provide regular hoof care.
8. Be vigilant in controlling pests and parasites.
9. Observe for any unusual lumps or growths from head to tail as well as beneath the tail.
10. Schedule routine check-ups. Call immediately if you suspect a problem.

Please welcome Dr. Tricia Arnold to our family at Tacoma Equine Hospital

Dr. Tricia Arnold has been practicing equine veterinary medicine since 1993. After completing an internship, she became a racetrack practitioner in Alberta and then on to Woodbine Race Track in Toronto. She moved to Louisville, Kentucky in 1999, where she worked on both race and performance horses. Her daughter Melissa is 10, and she has a dog "Nellie", and cat "Sage." The rest of her family is in western Canada so moving closer to home and joining a progressive and caring practice was her goal.

Upcoming Events:

Join us this **December 3, 2008** starting at 7 PM for our next educational seminar at the Tacoma Equine Hospital. Dr. Tricia Arnold will be talking about the special care and nutrition of the geriatric horse. This should aid you in providing a healthy environment for your horse as he/she ages. Please call the office at 253-535-6999 to reserve your spot today!

Next Seminar

Feb 4, 2008 – Equine Metabolic Diseases