



Caring for the Veteran Horse

The horses diet plays a major role in keeping him warm, healthy and in good condition during the later years in life and as the nights slowly start to draw in many horse owners will start to worry about how their veteran will cope this winter, so it is essential to plan ahead to ensure your horse stays fit and healthy.

Horses age at different rates with many horses still leading very active lives in their late teens and twenties. It will be a gradual process in most horses and typical signs to look out for as the horse grows older may be weight loss and mobility problems, but as a responsible owner we can manage and alleviate some of the conditions that bring on the aging process.

Maintaining Condition

For retired veterans that do lack condition it is important to allow them access to ad-lib forage such as good quality hay, haylage or grass. Forage should be the forefront of any horses diet and there are many options available to you to increase the fibre content of the horses diet if grass is limited.

Oils or fat supplemented diets are an excellent way of providing the horse with the additional calories required for improving and maintaining condition, and will also provide over twice the energy as the same amount of cereals. Antioxidants such as Vitamin E must be included when adding extra oil to the horses diet with many high fat supplements taking care of the increased requirement by incorporating Vitamin E.

On the other hand a good doers weight will have to be closely monitored. For older horses and ponies that are over weight there are low calorie feeds available that will provide a balanced diet without further promoting weight gain. As long as the availability of the nutrients contained in these feeds is good they can be fed to the older horse or pony.

Efficiency of the Digest System

One of the main reasons older horses start to lose weight is because of their inability to chew fibre properly due to poor dentition, which affects the whole digestive process. In older horses the population of micro organisms in the hind gut that the horse relies on for fibre digestion are less efficient. Therefore, a reduced fibre intake and less efficient fibre digestion can result in a horse losing weight and condition.



If your horse is unable to eat long stem fibre efficiently due to loss of teeth or poor tooth condition fibre should be provided through a hay replacer, which is fed alongside hard feed. Hay replacers can be in the form of chaffs, nuts or a mash which older horses with poor dentition should find very palatable.

By providing your horse with ad-lib fibre this will help maintain a healthy hindgut and body temperature in cold weather, as heat is produced through the digestion of feed. The greatest amount of heat is released when microbes in the hindgut digest high fibre feeds, which help keep the horse warm.

It is recommended that older horses should have their teeth checked every 6 months by a qualified equine dental technician.

Energy Requirements

Just because a horse becomes older does not necessarily mean that its competitive working career is finished, with many older horses still leading very active lives. Regular work combined with every day turnout where possible will help the horse's general health and wellbeing. This work will also help keep their muscles toned and joints supple.

If you have a veteran that shows no specific age related problems and is still enjoying an active life then the main priority is to continue to feed a suitable ration according to bodyweight and workload.

It is important to always remember to feed in accordance with breed and work. For example a newly retired thoroughbred that has had a hard working life will find it more difficult to 'switch off' and retirement may not come so easily. If you feel your veteran may benefit from a senior specific feed then there are many specialist feeds on the market designed to meet the requirements of the older horse, often supplying them with a number of additional nutrients.