



RESPONSIBLE
HORSE OWNER BOOKLET

CARING FOR YOUR OLDER HORSE



MSD

Animal Health



INTRODUCTION



As with human health, advances in veterinary medicine mean that our horses are living and working for longer.

However, ultimately the signs of diseases associated with ageing are unavoidable and can include stiffness, loss of condition, dental problems and conditions such as Cushing's disease. It is important to try to manage these signs as best we can and this guide seeks to give you advice on managing the older horse.

This guide is part of a series covering a range of different topics to help you keep your horse healthy.

For more information and to gain access to the rest of the series, please visit our website:

www.healthyhorses.co.uk



PREVENTATIVE HEALTHCARE

Preventative healthcare for the older horse can easily be overlooked, especially when the horse has been retired from competition. As horses get older their immune system weakens and leaves them more prone to disease and parasites. There may be dental issues as well that will require more regular care and attention. It is therefore vital for the health and well-being of the older horse that preventative healthcare measures are carried out. In this guide we will look at the key aspects of preventative healthcare to consider with your older horse.



Vaccination

Below are some answers to frequently asked questions about the vaccination of older horses.

My horse has been vaccinated its whole life, surely it is protected from disease?

No, it is important that your horse is kept up to date with its routine vaccinations. The duration of immunity provided by a vaccination is not dependent on how many years your horse has been vaccinated for so it is important to keep to the recommended vaccine schedule to ensure your horse is well protected.

This is even more important in older horses who often have a compromised immune system due to conditions such as Cushing's disease. This makes them much more susceptible to infections and, if infected, the disease is often more serious in such horses.

My horse is retired and does not leave the yard, can I stop vaccinating now?

No, it is important that your horse is vaccinated as other horses entering and leaving the yard could act as a source of infection for your horse.

Even if your horse is kept on its own, diseases such as equine influenza can travel up to 5km in favourable conditions and thus your horse is still at risk.

Furthermore, it is very important to vaccinate your horse against tetanus as it is caused by a bacterium (*Clostridium tetani*) which is found in the soil. Therefore, your horse does not need to leave home to contract this disease, which is most often fatal.

Worming the older horse

As horses age their immunity to parasites decreases and thus older horses are at an increased risk of high worm burdens. You must take great care to ensure your older horse is wormed correctly.

The most common internal parasites affecting older horses include:

- Large redworms (*Strongyles*)
- Small redworms (*Cyathostomes*)
- Pinworms (*Oxyuris*)
- Tapeworms (*Cestodes*)
- Bots (*Gastrophilus*)

An effective method of worming these horses, which reduces the use of wormers and therefore helps to reduce the development of resistance in worms, is to use a tailored worming programme.

Tailored worming programmes ensure you target specific worms with an effective product at the correct time of year whilst using faecal worm egg count (FWEC) testing to ensure you only worm horses when necessary. FWECs should be performed at regular intervals throughout your horse's grazing season (this may be all year if horses have access to pasture all year round).

It is important to remember that a FWEC will not test for the presence of encysted and inhibited larval stages of redworm and therefore it is

important to treat horses for these with a suitable product at the appropriate time of year (usually late autumn/winter), as recommended by your vet.

FWECs will also not detect tapeworm burdens so it is important to treat horses with a suitable product at the appropriate time of year. Alternatively, there is a tapeworm saliva test or blood test which can be performed once or twice a year as advised by your vet (in spring and/or autumn) to determine whether horses need worming for tapeworm at these times.

Furthermore, FWECs cannot detect infection with bots so horses should receive an appropriate wormer during the winter months.

Horses should be weighed as accurately as possible to ensure correct dosing and to help reduce resistance to wormers.

Dentistry

Dental problems are common in older horses and as such it is very important that older horses are given regular dental examinations, at least once or twice per year. Your vet or qualified Equine Dental Technician will advise you on the most appropriate interval between visits for your horse. Some horses with serious dental problems will show no signs, which is why routine examinations are so important.

Some horses, however, will show signs of dental problems, which include:

- Halitosis (bad smelling breath)
- Quiding – dropping partially chewed food
- Reduced appetite / difficulty eating / slow eating
- Food packing within cheeks
- Poorly digested food in droppings
- Weight loss

Dental problems and inadequate chewing of food can, in some cases, result in colic or choke.

As horses chew they grind down the surface of the teeth and to counter this equine teeth continually erupt throughout a horse's lifetime.

As horses age the roots become shorter until eventually the tooth may fall out, forming a gap between the two adjacent teeth. Any abnormal gaps between teeth are known as diastemas.

Diastemas can lead to two main problems:

- Firstly, there can be overgrowth of the opposite tooth resulting in damage to the soft tissues within the mouth.
- Secondly, food can become packed in the diastema resulting in infection of the gum, otherwise known as periodontal disease.

Horses with severe dental problems are likely to struggle to eat forage such as hay and so their diet may need to be altered accordingly.

For dental examinations you should only use a vet or qualified Equine Dental Technician (EDT).



Body condition and nutrition

It can be a struggle to keep older horses at an optimum weight and both being underweight or overweight can have severe health implications. It is important to be aware of the body condition score of your horse so that you can feed accordingly.

 0	<p>EMACIATED</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marked 'ewe' neck, narrow and slack at base • Skin tight over the ribs, which are clearly visible • Spinous processes sharp and easily seen • Angular pelvis, skin tight, very sunken rump. Deep cavity under tail and either side of croup
 1	<p>POOR</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 'Ewe' neck, narrow and slack at base • Ribs clearly visible • Skin clearly shrunken either side of spine. Spinous processes well defined • Rump sunken but skin supple, pelvis and croup well defined, cavity under tail
 2	<p>MODERATE</p> 	<p>Normally ideal for a fit racehorse or eventer</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neck narrow but firm, shoulder blade clearly defined • Ribs just visible • Spine well covered. Spinous processes felt but not seen • Rump flat either side of spine, croup well defined, some fat, slight cavity under tail
 3	<p>GOOD</p> 	<p>Normally ideal for most show and leisure horses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Firm neck, no crest (except stallions), shoulder blades defined • Ribs just covered, easily felt • No gutter along back. Spinous processes covered, but can be felt • Pelvis covered by fat and rounded, no gutter, pelvis easily felt
 4	<p>FAT</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slight crest on neck, wide and firm • Ribs well covered • Gutter along spine to root of tail. Fat stored either side of the spine to form slight 'apple bottom', with a gutter down the middle • Pelvis covered, felt only with firm pressure
 5	<p>OBESE</p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Marked crest, very wide and firm, creases of fat. Shoulder blade buried and difficult to feel • Ribs buried, cannot be felt • Deep gutter along spine, back broad and flat. Deep gutter to root of tail, producing marked apple bottom, skin distended • Pelvis buried, cannot be felt

Adapted from Carroll and Huntingdon (EVJ 1998). Images obtained with kind permission from World Horse Welfare.

For more information on weight management and body condition scoring visit www.worldhorsewelfare.org/Right-Weight

GENERAL TIPS FOR FEEDING THE OLDER HORSE

- Feed a high fibre diet that is low in starch and sugar.
- Feed a soaked feed for those horses suffering from dental disease as this is easier to eat and often more palatable.
- Certain medical conditions will need tailored diets, for example horses with liver disease may need a low protein diet.

Underweight horses

Some older horses will struggle to maintain weight, particularly those with dental problems, arthritis, hormonal dysfunction and poor hindgut health.

Horses with dental problems often struggle to grind their food properly and as such are unable to absorb nutrients and therefore their diet needs to be carefully managed in order to maximise calorie intake.

Tips for feeding an underweight horse:

- Ideally feed forage (hay/haylage /grass) ad lib so the horse has access to it at all times.
- Earlier cut hay/haylage is typically more nutritious than later cut forage.
- Horses with severe dental disease that are struggling to eat forage may benefit from a hay replacer. They may also benefit from having any concentrate feed soaked.
- Ensure concentrate meal sizes are kept small and, if possible, divide the daily ration over three or four feeds.
- Provide a suitable conditioning feed that is designed to help with weight gain, bearing in mind any individual requirements relating to sugar and starch content.
- Consider feeding oil products that are very calorie dense.
- Ensure that they are not 'bullied' off their feed by field companions.
- Ensure the diet is balanced – feed a balancer if the feed provided does not contain adequate vitamins and minerals.

Remember to consult your vet if you think your horse is under or overweight. There may be underlying health issues which need addressing. If these are left undetected and untreated then your horse will not change weight despite dietary changes.

Overweight horses

Older horses can also suffer from excessive weight gain due to a reduction in exercise and potentially more time spent grazing. This is particularly dangerous in horses suffering from Cushing's disease or Equine Metabolic Syndrome as it puts them at a higher risk of developing conditions such as arthritis and laminitis.

Tips for feeding an overweight horse:

- If feeding hay/haylage, a late cut (coarser, more stalky) type is likely to be less nutritious and therefore more suitable.
- Soaking hay for at least 3-4 hours has been shown to reduce sugars and calories.
- To maintain fibre intake and gut health never feed less than the equivalent (dry weight) of 1.5% of the horse's bodyweight per day.
- Use management techniques to extend eating time of forage e.g. small-holed nets or one haynet inside another.

- If a horse is out on grazing, consider restricting this – whether this is through strip grazing, the use of grazing muzzles or turnout in an arena or bark paddock with supplementary hay/haylage.
- Ensure the diet is balanced – the best way to ensure this without providing excess calories is to feed a balancer or a low calorie chaff-based feed that is balanced with vitamins and minerals.

Gut health

Good hindgut health is essential for the production of energy from food. Unfortunately hindgut health is often compromised in older horses for a number of reasons.

Firstly, some older horses may be on long term non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) for pain relief. This can cause an imbalance of microflora within the gut and colonic inflammation which can cause weight loss, diarrhoea and colic.

Secondly, older horses, particularly those with Cushing's disease, are susceptible to infections and therefore are often placed onto antibiotics and this also disrupts the microflora within the gut.

In order to help maintain gut health in older horses the adequate provision of good quality fibre, be it hay, chopped fibre or fibre pellets, is of huge importance.

You could also consider feeding your older horse a supplement containing both pre and postbiotics to help to maintain a healthy balance of gut flora and therefore help to optimise digestion.

Prebiotics are non-digestible food ingredients that act as food for the healthy bacteria within the gut to selectively stimulate growth and activity of the beneficial bacteria.

Postbiotics are beneficial components produced by bacteria during the fermentation process which have a positive effect on the healthy bacteria within the horse's gut.

HOOF CARE

Older horses may be shod or unshod depending on a number of factors including their level of work, condition of the hoof wall and a possible need for corrective shoeing.

For example, a retired horse living in a field may just need regular trimming but a horse with navicular disease may need shoes on to help to manage the condition.

Regardless of whether an older horse is shod or unshod they will still need regular farrier visits. It is recommended that horses are seen by the farrier every 4-8 weeks. This is vital for the prevention and early detection of any problems.

There are a number of conditions involving the feet which are more common in older horses. These include laminitis and foot abscesses which both have an increased incidence in horses with Cushing's disease.





COMMON HEALTH CONCERNS

Older horses should have regular veterinary check-ups to ensure their health is maintained and any problems are detected early.

Conditions which generally affect older horses include:

Cushing's disease

Otherwise known as PPID (pituitary pars intermedia dysfunction), Cushing's disease is a hormonal disease caused by degeneration of the neurons (a type of nerve cell) within the hypothalamus, an area in the brain. The degeneration of these neurons causes a reduction in the production of a substance called dopamine. This results in the overproduction of hormones such as ACTH.

It most commonly affects horses over the age of 15 years old and clinical signs include:

- Long, thick, often curly, coat which is not shed well in the summer
- Muscle wastage and a potbellied appearance
- Laminitis
- Lethargy
- Excessive sweating
- Excessive drinking and urination
- Recurrent infections
- Heavy worm burdens
- Weight loss

If your horse is suffering from any of these signs please contact your vet for further advice. Cushing's disease can be diagnosed by a blood test.

Cushing's disease is unfortunately a disease which cannot be cured, but the clinical signs can be managed with medication and a series of lifestyle changes. These include careful control of weight and feed intake to reduce the risk of laminitis, clipping of horses with thick coats in the summer, routine farriery, routine dental care and vaccination.

Arthritis

Otherwise known as Degenerative Joint Disease (DJD), arthritis is a common cause of lameness or stiffness in older horses. It is caused by changes in the cartilage within joints and subsequent remodelling of bone.

Clinical signs include:

- Reduced performance
- Stiffness that improves with exercise
- Lameness in one or more legs
- Weight loss due to chronic pain and difficulty grazing

If your horse is suffering from any of these signs please contact your vet for further advice.

Again, arthritis is a disease which cannot be cured but the clinical signs can be managed by a combination of medication and lifestyle changes. Injections of anti-inflammatory medication into affected joints is a common method of treatment and some affected horses/ponies need to be maintained on anti-inflammatory, pain relief medication long term.

In terms of management changes, a reduction in work load and allowing affected horses plenty of time to 'warm up' and 'cool down' can help to alleviate the problem.



Melanomas

Melanomas are tumours of the melanocytes in pigmented skin.

They occur most commonly in grey horses over 15 years old and are generally slow growing. Melanomas are often found under the tail, around the anus or in the throatlatch area. Contact your vet if you suspect your horse may have a melanoma.

Colic

Older horses can be prone to colic for a variety of reasons.

Firstly, dental issues may mean they are unable to chew food effectively, meaning that the incidence of impaction colic is higher in older horses.

Secondly, older horses can develop fatty lumps within the abdomen (lipomas) which can wrap around the intestines, occasionally causing severe colic.

Finally, as previously described, older horses are at an increased risk of high worm burdens which can be a contributing factor/ cause of colic.

SHOULD I PLAN FOR END OF LIFE?

Even though your horse might seem healthy it is always best to have a plan in place just in case the worst happens.

World Horse Welfare have two leaflets available, one to give you the facts, and the other to help you make a plan long before you will need it.

'Just in Case: The Facts' clearly and sensitively explains all aspects of the situation, such as the options available, what to expect, how to make the decision, insurance and legislation issues, and whether you should be there.

'Just in Case: Owner's Plan' provides a clear form which can be completed in advance. You can also use this to be certain key people know what choices you would make even if you can't be contacted in an emergency.

For more information and access to downloadable leaflets visit www.worldhorsewelfare.org/just-in-case

WHAT SHOULD I DO NOW?

- Monitor your horse closely for signs of age related conditions such as Cushing's disease.
- Monitor your horse's body condition regularly to ensure nutrition is being matched to energy requirements and that any underlying health problems are detected early.
- Ensure your horse has regular dentals, worming, hoof care and vaccination.
- Discuss end of life choices, ensure key people know your preferences and make a plan.

Where can I go for further information?

- Your vet
- To find a vet in your area findavet.rcvs.org.uk/find-a-vet
- To find a qualified Equine Dental Technician in your area www.baedt.com
- For more information on end of life choices www.worldhorsewelfare.org/just-in-case
- For further owner information www.healthyhorses.co.uk
- For further information on pre and postbiotics www.coopers-range.co.uk





**Further information
is available from:**

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