

# Feeding Older Horses Suggestions from Research

by Judy Reynolds, PhD., P.A.S.

"Just because a horse is old does not mean it has to be thin and in poor health," states Sarah Ralston, D.V.M., Rutgers University<sup>1</sup>. "With proper attention to dentition, ration, and veterinary care, horses can maintain excellent body condition and health well past thirty years of age."

- Older horses often become less effective at saliva production, which leads to increased risk of choke. Horses can choke on any feed, including long-stemmed hay and sweet feed, not just pellets. Feeds should be moistened for horses that have choked previously, tend to bolt their feed, or don't seem to produce an adequate amount of saliva. Alfalfa pellets expand to three times their size when moistened and should not be fed dry or as more than about 10% of a concentrate diet without being moistened.
- Yeast cultures, probiotics, B-vitamin supplements, and additional vitamin C can be of benefit to older horses.
- Horses with chronic infections may benefit from 10 grams of vitamin C given twice daily.
- Sweet feeds worsen glucose intolerance, another common problem in older horses, and should be avoided, if possible.
- Alfalfa and beet pulp are excellent feeds for senior horses, but are high in calcium and should not be fed in excessive amounts.
- A veterinarian can do various blood tests for organ function. Creatinine and blood urea nitrogen (BUN) tests determine renal (kidney) function. Hepatic (liver) enzymes increase with liver dysfunction. Horses with kidney or liver dysfunction should be fed lower protein and higher carbohydrate rations. Added fats are acceptable for horses with renal disease, but not hepatic, because of the danger of hyperlipidemia. Consult a veterinarian and nutritionist for special rations for horses with medical conditions.
- Decreased thyroid function, mainly seen in older geldings, can be treated medically and with low carbohydrate rations.
- Pituitary tumors are very common in mares over 20 years of age (70% in horses studied) and can be treated medically by a veterinarian.
- Thyroid deficiency can be treated with hormone therapy, but is difficult to diagnose.
- In anemic horses, check for copper deficiency, and iron excess. Do not give iron injections.

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