

Seven Senior Horse Facts

Senior horses represent a growing percentage of the equine population, thanks to improved understanding of equine physiology, veterinary technology advancements, better nutritional options, and owners dedicated to providing lifelong care. But with increasing age still come additional health considerations. The Horse caught up with Nancy S. Loving, DVM, who owns and operates Loving Equine Clinic, in Boulder, Colo., to discuss caring for senior horses. Here are seven important points to remember.

PHOTOS BY ANNE M. EBERHARDT



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Each horse ages differently. Some horses begin appearing or acting “old” in their mid-teens, while others don’t show many signs of aging until they reach their 20s. Treating each senior horse as an individual and addressing health concerns that arise regardless of the animal’s physical age can help him maintain a good quality of life as he ages.

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Senior horses’ musculoskeletal systems benefit from exercise. Regular exercise is the best way to maintain relatively sound older horses. But before hopping in the saddle, check to ensure an older horse’s tack still fits. As horses age, their body shapes can change quite drastically. “A saddle that fit well in past years may no longer fit, with the horse developing soreness as a result,” Loving says.

Also devote ample time to warm-up and cool-down. “His musculoskeletal structures might take a little longer to get going than when he was younger,” she notes. “Spend a little time helping him get the creaks and stiffness out before asking him for more strenuous effort.”

Seniors not only need to be warmed up more slowly but also conditioned (such as after a winter break) less rapidly than younger animals. “Since their musculoskeletal system is likely not as robust as when the horse was younger, it will take longer to bring fitness to an even lower level than previously expected,” Loving says. “Also, it is harder to bring an older horse back from an extended layoff so it is better to keep the horse in some kind of working condition throughout the winter, even if it’s several days per week of riding at a walk coupled with daily turnout.”

Finally, be mindful that senior horses likely won’t retain all the same physical capabilities they had in their younger days. If a horse appears to be struggling with some aspects of his work, consider reducing his workload or transitioning to a less physically demanding exercise routine.

3 Regular hoof care, while important, can be challenging for seniors.

Just like their younger counterparts, aged horses require regular farrier care. "Good hoof care minimizes stress on the joints and hoof structures, and should be a regular part of routine preventive care," Loving says. But remember that leg lifting and weight shifting during farrier visits and other hoof care might take an extra toll on old bones and joints, causing them to become sore. Loving says some senior horses will benefit from a dose of a non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drug before being trimmed or shod, provided the animal has no kidney or liver problems, but owners should consult a veterinarian before administering any drugs. "It's also important that the selected farrier is able to work on the horse's feet without having to lift the limbs too high," she adds. "Use of a Hoofjack is quite helpful to give the horse something to be supported by to take undue weight off the other legs and off the farrier's body."



4 Movement is the best medicine for aging joints. Loving's No. 1 tip for keeping a senior horse's joints healthy is providing regular turnout to keep joints and muscles limber and active. "Locking a horse of any age in a stall is counterproductive to good musculoskeletal health," she says. "Most horses prefer to be where they can move about and rarely need a shelter, particularly if they are blanketed during cold, inclement weather. A run-in shed is an excellent alternative that allows paddock and/or pasture turnout 24/7."

5 Senior horses are sensitive to temperature extremes. The older horse might not regulate body temperature as efficiently as he once did, so he might require some assistance in staying comfortable in very cold wet conditions or extremely warm temperatures. Again, provide a run-in shelter to help horses stay dry in cold, damp conditions; it also furnishes shade from the sun when it's hot. Many older horses benefit from blanketing in cold or damp conditions to help maintain their body heat.

6 Senior horses can develop respiratory problems. Horses of all ages can develop respiratory problems for a variety of reasons, but issues such as inflammatory airway disease (IAD) and recurrent airway obstruction (RAO, or heaves) are especially common in aged horses. Help keep old horses' airways healthy by housing animals outside with access to a run-in, reducing horses' exposure to ammonia and dust when they're stalled, and offering feed and hay on the ground to encourage mucous to drain from the airways when animals put their heads down to eat. Additionally, have a veterinarian examine senior horses with respiratory problems to see if medical treatment could improve their health status.

7 Senior horse diets require careful planning. "While young horses are not exempt from diet-related disorders, older horses are particularly prone to certain metabolic conditions (equine Cushing's disease, for example) that may be exacerbated by overfeeding or the feeding of inappropriate feedstuffs, like carbohydrate- and fructose-rich materials," Loving says. She recommends owners work with their veterinarians to tailor a diet for each individual older horse, especially to prevent obesity.

On the other end of the spectrum, Loving noted that "an older horse with poor dentition may have trouble obtaining enough nutrients to maintain body condition. It is important to implement regular dental care, parasite control measures, and to fine-tune a diet that maximizes use of nutrients."