

How to care for our older friends

Some of the most valuable horses we own could be as labeled “senior citizens.” They can provide reliable mounts for our youngsters or could possibly even be an old friend from our childhood. No matter if they are packing our children at “Play Days” or just keeping the grass down in the pasture, older horses have unique needs.

Maintaining proper body condition can be very difficult with geriatric horses. Most of them tend to stay a little on the thin side. Just as with us, as horses age their body does not utilize food as efficiently as it did in years past.

Sever dental abnormalities can cause pain and prevent them from eating enough to meet the demand of their body. Hay is the first food stuffs aging equids loose the ability to consume. Horses that are suffering from dental disease will often drop “wads” partially chewed hay in the feeder. Additionally, they may sift through the hay leaving the stems and picking out the softer, more palatable portions of the ration. Regular dental exams and can help keep your older horse eating hay and prevent you from spending so much on the high priced senior rations.

An aggressive parasite control program is also imperative with aging horses. Internal parasites can rob these animals of valuable nutrients necessary to keep their weight up. Keep in mind the parasite burden is largest in the spring and early summer when the weather is moist and warm. During this time a rotating deworming protocol is needed to purge the parasites and keep from developing a resistant population.

Feeding is also a tricky subject with geriatric horses. There are several different types of senior feeds available that are designed to be feed in completely different manners. “Complete” senior rations are available for animals that have lost the ability to eat hay. They are designed to replace the ENTIRE diet, meaning the hay and the concentrate (sweet feed, pellets, etc). Because these feeds are designed to replace the whole diet, they must be feed in extremely high amounts often as much as 10-20lbs twice daily. Conversely, there are senior feeds that are formulated to be fed with hay and should be feed in normal amounts. When you are purchasing feed make sure to pay close attention to the label to make sure you are feeding the appropriate amount getting the best feed for your dollar.

Vaccinations are also vital to prevent life threatening disease from taking a toll on your horse. Because their immune systems are not as strong as younger animals, it is vital to prevent disease. The spring vaccinations should be administered in March or April and should consist of and EWT/Flu Rhino, West Nile, Rabies. In the fall a Flu/Rhino should be boosted as well.

The key to keeping your favorite horses part of the family for many years to come is PREVENTION. The age old adage “An ounce of prevention, is worth a pound of cure” are words to take to heart. If you have any questions about your aging equine, please do not hesitate to call or stop by.