



Q&A With David Nash of Hygain

Q: Firstly, I'm not looking for a senior's card for my horse - but what constitutes a geriatric these days?

Senior horses are generally defined as those whom are older than 15 years. However you must judge your horse individually to assess whether they have special requirements.



Q: Are horses, like humans, living longer?

Due to advances in nutrition, veterinary medicine and the management practices of horse owners, horses like us are living longer. This means that it's not uncommon for a horse to still be around and competing into their late 20 and even 30's. Many of the horses that won gold medals at the recent Olympics were in their late teens. Even though they have reached these years they need to be managed differently to other horses.

As a result, geriatric horses can be divided into two main groups; ones that are still competing or are still exercised regularly and those that are sedentary living the life of luxury in retirement. Their nutrient requirements will be quite different.

Q: We're coming into winter – how much more does the cold and wet effect the older horse?

Horses' energy requirements increase in winter as they require more energy to keep warm. You will find if you feed your horse the same feed during autumn as in winter they will drop condition very quickly. It is estimated that you may need to increase your older horse's energy levels by up to 25% to ensure that they maintain condition during winter.

Roughages such as soft hay or chaff will be fermented in the hindgut producing some heat as a by product, therefore feeding more roughage will assist in keeping the horse warm inside and will help to maintain condition. Rugging and if possible, providing shelter will also assist in keeping the horse warm and maintaining condition.

Q: Because older horses do less, do they need less to eat?

Not all older horses do less so you would still match feed intake to work rate. However you may find that your older horse in work or resting may require a little more feed than younger horses in similar conditions.

Q: Is the older horse more vulnerable to infections or organ dysfunction?

Geriatric horses can suffer from decreased kidney and/or liver function, both of which can have an effect on nutrient utilization. Horses are unique in that they excrete excess dietary calcium in their urine, not in their manure as most other species do. So if kidney function becomes impaired, stones of calcium oxalate can build up in the kidney or



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bladder. There also is the potential for calcium to build up to dangerous levels in the bloodstream. Horses with kidney failure need to be placed on a low calcium diet (less than 0.45% of the overall ration), and protein and phosphorus also should be reduced (to less than 10%, and less than 0.3%, respectively), contrary to the usual recommendations for older horses.

Horses with liver failure might suffer from jaundice, weight loss, lethargy, loss of appetite and intolerance for fat and protein in the diet. Severely affected horses also could be irritable and circle aimlessly, or press their heads against objects.

In contrast to kidney failure, horses with liver problems need increased sugar in their diets in order to maintain blood glucose levels. Their diets should emphasize carbohydrates and de-emphasize protein and fats. Because the liver also is a site of the synthesis of B vitamins (especially niacin) and vitamin C, affected horses should be fed a diet supplemented with elevated levels of vitamins and minerals.

Q: Is it okay to keep feeding senior horses with the younger ones, or should I segregate them?

If your older horse is a shy feeder I would suggest feeding it separately so it gets to finish its feed without interruption from the young stock. Also its diet would be slightly different to the other horses. If possible keep older horses with a companion as they are herd animals and may fret when isolated.

Q: What are the best types of hay for older horses?

The best types of hay for older horses with declining teeth condition are softer immature hays such as many pasture hays and some legume hay.

Q: How can I find out if the hay I've bought is too tough or fibrous for my older horse?

An easy way to assess hay's suitability to the older horse is a simple grab test. If you grab it and it is soft on your hands it is high in digestible fibre and will be suitable for the horse. If it is hard on your hands it will be high in indigestible fibre and will not be as beneficial to the older horse.

Q: Are there any special grains I should give him?

Processed grains such as micronized, extruded or steam flaked grains have been heat processed which will assist the horse in digesting the starch inside the grain earlier in the digestive process. Grain digested in the small intestine will yield more energy to the horse than if the grain is digested in the large intestine. It will also reduce the risk of overloading the large intestine with grain which increases the risk of problems such as colic, laminitis and acidosis.



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Q: What about adding fat to the horse's diet?

Adding fat to a horse's diet can be of great benefit as the older horse still digests fat quite well. Fats or oils can be simply top dressed onto the feed or already mixed in premixed feeds. Oils energy is around 2.25 times the energy of cereal grains so a lot less feed is required to meet the horse's energy requirements.

Q: Do the horse's teeth play an important role in seniors' feeding practices?

It's been stated that the best feed in the world will do a horse no good if he can't digest it.

As a horse ages, it gradually wears down the grinding surfaces of the molars. Even though teeth continue to grow throughout a horse's life, often the wear and tear teeth received outstrip the replacement rate. In addition, the incisors (vital to tearing off grass and forage from the ground) become more sloping over the years, and as they verge on the horizontal, they become far less efficient at biting down and tearing fibrous foodstuffs.

Dental "hooks" on the molars, a problem for all domestic horses throughout their lives, can compound the problem this is especially likely if your horse has not had the benefit of routine dental checkups. Older horses also can suffer from broken or missing teeth, usually as the result of trauma (although long-term infections of teeth also occur and can have the same result). A broken tooth is not only painful; it can interrupt the normal dental surfaces and make it next to impossible for your horse to chew. The loss of a molar or premolar also can reduce the ability of the horse to chew its feed, and if a molar or premolar is lost, the opposing teeth will grow into the space, creating a condition called "wave mouth, which further complicates matters.

If an incisor or incisors are lost, your horse might not be able to graze efficiently, so don't depend on pasture to help maintain his condition. There always is the possibility of dental abscesses, often caused by a particle of food, or a foreign object picked up while grazing, lodged in the gum. All of these dental problems can lead to a loss of appetite or poorly chewed food that might fall out of your horse's mouth. The food that does get swallowed often is harder to digest because it is in larger than normal chunks that the body might not be able to break down.

Q: If his teeth are just about beyond redemption, how can I feed him?

In very old horses, the teeth can become so worn that they are practically nonexistent. Without the essential grinding surfaces, such a horse has no way of taking in forage or grain in the normal way. A common and effective way of getting food into the older horse with little or no teeth is to feed a mash. Pellets or extruded nuggets can be mixed with water to make a mash like meal that the horse can eat with little problem. You should also ensure that you are still providing adequate supplementation of vitamins and minerals, not just an energy and protein source.



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Q: How often should I get the older horse's teeth checked?

Needless to say, the older horse's teeth should be checked at least twice a year, and floated (rasped) as necessary. Your veterinarian should pay special attention to the molars at the very back of the jaw, where hooks and points often get neglected.

Q: Are there specially formulated rations for the older horse?

Formulating rations specifically for the senior equine is a recently new phenomenon in Australia. These feeds should be formulated with easily digestible energy and protein with vitamin and mineral levels all taken into consideration. They tend to be softer to enable consumption by horses with poor teeth. Some even have digestive aids such as Yea Sacc1026 a live yeast culture, which aids in the digestion of nutrients and increases fibre digestion. These rations added with chaff or soft hay are the preferred way to feed you elderly equine. Why? because the ration has been scientifically balanced for your horse to obtain all the essential nutrients required to keep him/her in prime condition.

A few check points in feeding and managing your older horse:

- ◆ Maintain and regularly check teeth
- ◆ Feed soft leafy roughages (pasture, hay, chaff)
- ◆ Do not exceed 1% calcium levels in total diet
- ◆ Keep balance of Ca:P ratio (1.2:1)
- ◆ Look for feed designed especially for senior horses
- ◆ If feeding a formulated feed, choose one that is processed for increased digestion such as Micronizing which contains correct mineral levels
- ◆ Take advantages of Live Yeast Cultures
- ◆ Take advantage of chelated minerals (more digestible)

Hoofnote: Hygain produces a product named Equine Senior.