



Our equine friends are living longer which means they will require specialized care because, like humans, their needs change as they age

Golden Years

DIET AND DENTAL CARE ARE CORNERSTONES TO KEEPING AGING HORSES HEALTHY

By AMANDA DUCKWORTH

HAPPILY, HORSES ARE living longer than ever these days. However, the effects of aging are something that cannot be avoided as the years go by. Elderly equines can require specialized care, and understanding their needs can help make their later years truly golden.

Any health plan has to be tailored to specific individuals but that becomes increasingly true with age. Working with a trusted veterinarian is important, as is staying up to date on research. Caregivers and veterinarians both want to do what is best for the horse, but what that entails can get harder to define as an equine ages.

For those looking for the baseline in elderly equine care, the American Association of Equine Practitioners provides guidelines in its paper “10 Tips for Caring for the Older Horse.”

“Advances in nutrition, management

and health care are helping, horses are living longer, more useful lives,” it explains. “It’s not uncommon to find horses and ponies living well into their 20s and 30s. While genetics play a role in determining life span, you too, can have an impact.

“You may think that turning your old-timer out to pasture is the kindest form of retirement. But horses are individuals. Some enjoy being idle; others prefer to be a part of the action. Whatever you do, don’t ignore the horse. Proper nutrition, care, and exercise will help the animal thrive.”

While complete retirement is usually offered in a well-meaning way, a recent study shows that maintaining some degree of activity helps horses who are aging. In January 2025, Scientific Reports published “A structured exercise regimen enhances autonomic

function compared to unstructured physical activities in geriatric horses.”

“Importantly, ageing is not a disease but a condition in which the body experiences a decline in body mass, aerobic capacity, functional immunity, and autonomic function with time,” explained researchers. “Engaging in physical activity is essential for maintaining muscle mass and immunological function in aged and unfit horses.”

For the study, 27 geriatric horses were used and studied for 12 weeks under different activity levels. One group was sedentary, one group participated in unstructured activities, and the third group followed a structured exercise regimen. Researchers also noted that all of the horses had previously participated in equestrian sports and retired from competition around the age of 15. Following their retirement, they either were sedentary or continued with physical activities.

According to researchers, the minimum and average heart rates decreased in the structured exercise group from weeks 10 to 12, while no changes were observed in the other groups. Additionally, heart rate variability was significantly higher in the structured exercise group compared to the unstructured group and, to a lesser extent, compared to the sedentary group.

“Geriatric horses participating in a structured exercise program showed improvements in both physical fitness and autonomic regulation compared to those with unstructured activities or a sedentary lifestyle,” researchers concluded. “Conversely, aged horses engaging in unstructured physical activity demonstrated potentially negative effects. These findings provide valuable insights into how different activity levels affect autonomic regulation in retired geriatric horses.

“The study has significant welfare implications, suggesting the need for management practices to enhance well-being, maintain welfare and, to some extent, preserve the economic value of

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geriatric horses after retirement. While there is evidence of the potential to sustain autonomic responses, further research is necessary to explore the muscular adaptations and related enzymatic functions arising from a structured exercise regimen in geriatric horses.”

Having a basic understanding of what possible changes can occur in an elder herd member is also a valuable tool. In January 2023, Immunity & Aging published “Immunosenescence and inflammaging in the aged horse.”

“The equine population in the United States and worldwide now includes a higher percentage of geriatric horses than ever previously recorded, and as methods to treat and manage elderly equids are developed and refined, this aging population will likely continue to expand,” explained research-

ers. “A better understanding of how horses age and the effect of age on immunity and disease susceptibility is needed to enable targeted preventative healthcare strategies for aged horses.”

Researchers reviewed the current state of knowledge regarding the effect of aging on immunity, vaccine responsiveness, and disease risk in the horse, highlighting similarities and differences to what is observed in aged humans.

“Similar to the aging population of people, much interest exists in maintaining optimal health and function well into late life, and strategies designed to preserve a youthful immune system in the old horse population are needed,” researchers explained. “In contrast to geriatric humans, healthy aged horses appear to be relatively effective at avoiding infectious diseases. Aged horses, however,

do experience a high prevalence of immunosuppressive endocrine disease (eg., PPID), resulting in an increasingly large population of older horses at high risk of impaired immune function.

“Interventions designed to preserve adaptive immunity and deter the shift towards a proinflammatory bias that occurs in old horses may prevent or delay age-related comorbidities and promote equine health well into old age.”

Proper nutrition is vital at all stages but can be more complex as a horse ages, and dental health also plays an important role. In September 2023, the Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association published “Advances in dental management in the equine geriatric patient: strategies for improved welfare.”

“Geriatric horses have a high prevalence of dental disease, which



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A famous retiree who arrived this year at Old Friends in Kentucky is the 25-year-old Bird Town. She's the first Kentucky Oaks winner to retire there

is a culmination of age-related dental changes and dental disease throughout the life of the horse that may have long-term consequences," explained researchers. "Wear abnormalities, diastemata with periodontal disease, pulpitis and endodontic disease, infundibular caries, and equine odontoclastic tooth resorption and hypercementosis become more prevalent with age. Recognition of age-related dental disease at an early stage can help to treat and possibly preserve teeth for longer."

Researchers noted that it is important to remember that the age at which horses are regarded to be geriatric is higher now with horses performing at top competition levels well into their 20s; however, the age at which dental disease becomes more prevalent is significantly earlier than that, at 15 to 16 years of age.

"Regular dental examination and

remedial odontoplasty are recommended and are even more important in older horses to identify any early-stage dental disease and implement the appropriate treatment to minimize long-term implications," concluded researchers. "In addition, careful dietary management to prevent conditions such as generalized peripheral caries or prevent food packing into diastemata aggravating periodontal disease can help to manage or minimize dental conditions.

"With advances in dental diagnostics and treatments and improved equine management and diets, dental disease should not have a detrimental effect on older horses. Dental practitioners have a very important role to play in maintaining the welfare of an aging horse population."

Another layer of the equation is the sentimentality that often builds around

an aging herd member, which is important for veterinarians and caregivers alike to keep in mind. In July 2020, the Journal of Equine Veterinary Science published "Aging Equines: Understanding the Experience of Caring for a Geriatric Horse with a Chronic Condition."

For the study, researchers evaluated the experience of 1,448 people in the United States who currently care for or had previously cared for a geriatric horse and how that experience was qualified by the presence or absence of a chronic condition in the horse. In order to better understand the burden of caregiving from the owner's standpoint, an anonymous, online questionnaire was created.

"Findings from the study supported the hypothesis that owners of geriatric horses with a chronic condition experienced higher levels of physical and emotional care burden, regardless of the

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age of the geriatric horse,” researchers concluded. “Attachment levels reported by participants were high, regardless of the health status of the horse.

“This exploratory study provides the equine practitioner a greater understanding of the care burden experienced by owners of geriatric horses, particularly of owners of geriatric horses with a chronic condition, who rely on their veterinarian to guide their management and health care decisions. Veterinarians can help prepare and support clients as they navigate the complexities of caring for an older horse with a chronic condition.”

Staying alive is one thing, maintaining a high quality of life is another. It is often a major factor when dealing with a health crisis, especially when it comes

decisions in real-life situations.”

During the study, seven focus group discussions were conducted, and they included horse owners, equine veterinarians, veterinary officers, farriers, and horse caregivers. Analysis focused on similarities and differences in the views of these different groups.

The study showed agreement when it came to the importance of the individuality of the horse for assessing QoL and the relevance of QoL in making decisions about veterinary interventions. However, researchers found differences between the groups in terms of the time required to assess QoL, stakeholders’ contributions to QoL assessments, and challenges resulting from those contributions.

“While owners and caregivers of horses

relevant stakeholders in this process.”

One of the hardest parts of working with animals is the fact that they are unable to say how much pain they are (or aren’t) in. This means those that know them best have to assess the situation to the best of their abilities. In November 2022, the *Equine Veterinary Journal* published “Pain severity scores for common equine disorders as provided by horse owners and equine veterinarians.”

The cross-sectional study aimed to compare estimates of pain experienced by horses as provided by veterinarians and horse owners and to determine factors associated with individuals who perceive horses to be experiencing extreme pain or minimal pain.

It was conducted by sending internet-based questionnaires to horse owners and veterinarians that included items related to recognition of pain in horses, estimated degree of pain experienced by horses, and demographic information. In all, 553 horse owners and 263 veterinarians took part. Respondents were primarily from the United States.

“Pain scores varied widely and differences in median scores from horse owners and veterinarians were small,” researchers concluded. “Horse owners providing high pain ratings were more likely to have <10 horses and to not have a college degree. Those providing low pain ratings were less likely to own <10 horses. Veterinarians providing high pain ratings were more likely to be employed in a mixed animal practice and to lack board-certification in a veterinary specialty. Veterinarians providing low pain ratings were more likely to be male. Assessments of the degree of pain horses are experiencing vary widely among horse owners and equine veterinarians.”

Caring for an elderly animal comes with its own unique experiences, and often there is not a straightforward answer. However, armed with the latest information, those in charge of aging equines can approach the situation with the compassion and knowledge it can often require. **BH**



One area of concern for elderly horses is the health of their teeth, so regular dental check-ups should be on the calendar



to older horses, and it is an issue that impacts horse owners around the globe. In August 2024, BMC Veterinary Research published “How long is life worth living for the horse?” A focus group study on how Austrian equine stakeholders assess quality of life for chronically ill or old horses.”

“Quality of life (QoL) provides a comprehensive concept underpinning veterinary decision-making that encompasses factors beyond physical health,” explained researchers. “It becomes particularly pertinent when seeking responsible choices for chronically ill or old horses that emphasize their well-being and a good QoL over the extension of life. How different stakeholders use the concept of QoL is highly relevant when considering the complexity of these

emphasized their knowledge of a horse and the relevance of the time they spend with their horse, the veterinarians in the study focused on the differences between their own QoL assessments and those of horse owners,” researchers concluded. “In response to challenges regarding QoL assessments and decision-making, stakeholders described different strategies such as drawing comparisons to human experiences.

“Differences between stakeholders regarding equine QoL assessments contribute to challenges when making decisions about the care of chronically ill or old horses. The results of this study suggest that individual and collaborative reflection about a horse’s QoL should be encouraged, for example by developing practicable QoL assessment tools that support