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OLDER HORSE: SPECIAL CARE & NUTRITION

Older Horses - Jul 19th, 05

Special Care and Nutrition

Due to improvements in nutrition, management and health care, horses are living longer, more useful lives. It's not uncommon to find horses and ponies living well into their 20's and even 30's. While genetics play a determining role in longevity, you too, can have an impact. By providing proper care and nutrition, you can help make your horse's golden years happier and more productive.

THE AGING PROCESS

Time does take its toll on many body systems. The horse's digestive tract isn't as efficient as it once was. Bones and joints are less resilient. Elderly horses may feel the aches and pains of arthritis. The immune system is less reliable, making older horses more susceptible to illness and slower to recover from both disease and injury. Parasite infestations also take a heavy toll. Aged horses are more prone to respiratory, eye and dental problems. Elderly animals are also less able to cope with environmental stresses, such as wind, wet and cold. Additionally, hormonal changes may affect overall body condition, hair growth, appetite and energy levels. But while some signs of decline may be directly related to the aging process, others may have an underlying medical problem, so be sure to consult with your veterinarian.

SPECIAL NUTRITIONAL NEEDS

While every facet of horse health care is important, proper nutrition is vital. As horses age, their digestive systems become less efficient. Hormonal and metabolic changes affect or interfere with their ability to digest, absorb and utilize essential nutrients in their feed, especially protein, phosphorus and fiber. For these reasons, many older horses benefit from complete rations with built-in roughage that are specially formulated to compensate for changes in their digestive physiology.

When selecting feeds, evaluate your choices by the following criteria. The senior diet should be:

- Highly palatable
- Easy to chew and swallow
- Clean and dust-free to prevent or lessen the impact of allergies or lung disease
- Provide 12-16% protein
- Contain enough high-quality fiber to aid digestion
- Provide essential minerals, including calcium and phosphorus in the proper ratio
- Include all essential vitamins, especially vitamin C and B-complex vitamins
- Provide enough readily available energy to maintain proper body condition
- Include adequate, palatable fat from a vegetable source to promote healthy skin and hair, aid

- digestion and boost energy intake

DENTAL CARE

A horse that can chew its feed properly will waste less of it, get more nutrient value from it and be less likely to choke or colic. Have your veterinarian examine and float (file) your horse's teeth at least once a year -- twice annually if the horse is over 20. This will keep his nipping and grinding surfaces in good working order. It also gives the veterinarian a chance to troubleshoot for broken or lost teeth, and check for tongue, gum or other problems.

A TOTAL MANAGEMENT PLAN

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 abandon the horse. Proper nutrition, care and exercise will help the animal thrive. Develop a total management plan for your senior citizen. Keep in mind the following guidelines:

- Provide a safe, comfortable environment, free of hazards and with adequate shelter from wind, rain, snow, sun and biting insects.
Arrange for routine dental care to keep the teeth and mouth in good working order; at least once per year is recommended.
Observe your horse on a regular basis. Watch for changes in body condition, behavior and attitude. Address problems, even seemingly minor ones, right away.
- Feed a high-quality diet. Avoid dusty and moldy feeds.
Feed your older horse away from younger, more aggressive ones so it won't have to compete for feed.
For troubled chewers, wet the feed to soften it or add enough water to make a "slurry," a thick, soup-like ration that the horse can drink. Many horses that have trouble keeping on weight can be fed a bran mash that may assist them in digesting the forage component of their diet.
- Feed at more frequent intervals so as not to upset the digestive system; 2-3 times daily is best. Provide plenty of fresh, clean, tepid water. Excessively cold water reduces consumption which can lead to colic and other problems.
Adjust and balance rations to maintain proper body conditions. A good rule of thumb is to be able to feel the ribs but not see them.
- Provide adequate, appropriate exercise to maintain muscle tone, flexibility and mobility.
Be vigilant in controlling pests and parasites. Deworm at regular intervals (consult your veterinarian to establish a schedule).
- Manage pastures and facilities to reduce infestations.
Provide regular hoof care. Your farrier should trim or shoe the horse whether or not you ride to maintain proper hoof shape and movement. This will help prevent lameness and injuries.
- Groom your horse frequently to promote circulation and skin health.
Be aware that older horses are prone to tumors. Look for any unusual lumps or growths from head to tail as well as beneath the tail (especially on gray horses).
Provide adequate ventilation in barns. Keep pastures mown and weed-free to reduce allergens.
- Reduce dust in paddocks as much as possible to prevent respiratory distress.
- Schedule routine checkups with your veterinarian. Call immediately if you suspect a problem.

HEALTH CARE PARTNERSHIP

While there is much you can do to keep your older horse healthy and spry, some conditions associated with aging require medical intervention. Your equine practitioner can identify and treat such things as tumors, hormone imbalances, renal disease, Cushing's syndrome, arthritis, reproductive problems and other maladies. Remember too, that older horses are at greater risk of

developing laminitis (founder), so proper nutrition is essential.

Schedule regular check-ups and keep a good line of communication open with your veterinarian. A quick response to ailments, injuries or a decline in fitness can keep your older horse from having a serious or prolonged setback. That means less worry for you and a better quality of life for your old friend.

For more information, contact your veterinarian.

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