



focus

on a healthy long life

At Petplan Equine we recognise that like humans, horses are living longer and healthier lives



With advancing veterinary technology and treatment-types there is much more we can do to help our horses enjoy their senior years and, as always, prevention is better than cure! We have teamed up with Keith Chandler, Petplan Equine vet of the year 2012, who has a keen interest in elderly horses, to bring you this guide.



Signs of an ageing horse

Like people, horses age at different rates; for example some fifteen-year-old horses will seem just like they did as a six-year-old, whereas others will start to age more quickly. This will be dependent of their breed and type as well as temperament - but the rate at which they age is often down to how they are managed.

Some of the signs you might notice include greying hair around their face and muzzle, taking longer to warm up for ridden work, dips above their eyes and a change in behaviour. There are also some more serious signs that need attention which we talk about later.



Keeping your horse healthy in his later years.

It's important to look after a horse right from the beginning to make sure his joints, teeth, and every part of him last for as long, as he hopefully will!

Teeth

Have your horse's teeth checked by an equine vet or a BAEDT (British Association of Equine Dental Technicians) at least once a year. If a horse has poor teeth it will not chew its food properly and therefore not get all the benefit from the feed. Dental treatment is more than just tooth-rasping - many older horses need treatment for things like wave-mouth or diastema (small painful gaps between the cheek teeth) so don't forget to have regular and thorough dental checks. Many old horses don't tolerate the speculum (gag) well, so do respect your vet or BAEDT's decision to request a tranquilliser if necessary.

Joints

Horses that do more throughout their lives will be more prone to joint problems in older life - warming up and cooling down before exercise as well as riding on a good surface will keep your horse's joints healthy for longer. There are also benefits in using a glucosamine or chondroitin supplement throughout the horse's life; these supplements help to maintain the smooth cartilage that protects joints.

Breathing

Stabling, riding on various surfaces and dusty hay are all examples of how a modern life affects the horse's respiratory system. There are some simple methods to help reduce the likeliness of problems in later life. Only feed good quality hay or forage that doesn't contain mould spores and isn't dusty; if hay is a little dusty, soaking or steaming it can be beneficial. Make sure your horse's stable has a good air flow - high ceilings, and windows can significantly increase this. Consider your horse's bedding, straw and shavings can be dusty so if you do have a stable with a reduced air flow using paper or a dust free alternative can be beneficial. Know your horse's breathing rate at rest and after exercise: a normal horse at rest has between 8 and 10 breaths per minute but one with a respiratory problem will take between 14 and 16 breaths or more.

Feet

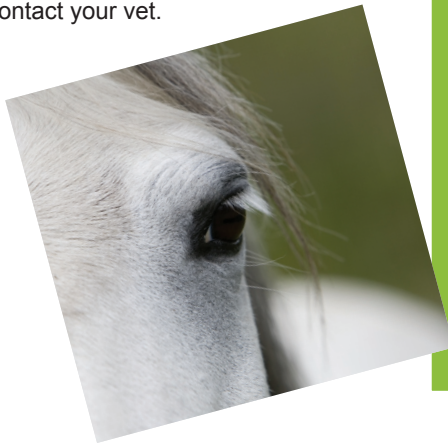
Hoof quality can decline with age and conditions such as cracks and abscesses take longer to heal. Keep your horse's feet tidy through regular trimming or being shod, make sure hooves are picked out every day, if not more, and use this opportunity to check them. If you have any concerns about your horse's hooves, have your vet or farrier check them as soon as you can. Biotin supplements can work well in maintaining hoof-horn quality, but do speak to your vet first.





Signs of illness in older horses

Knowing your horse's normal behaviour, temperature, heart-rate and habits will help you notice when something is wrong. Look out for the following signs of ill health and if you notice any of these, do not hesitate to contact your vet.



Signs of ill health:

- Loss of weight and condition - This could be linked to pain or a failure to absorb nutrients from the bowels
- Dropping feed - this usually indicates a dental problem as above
- Lameness - older legs are more prone to wear & tear injury from years of work!
- Discharge from the nose - sinus infections are common in geriatric horses - these discharges sometimes have a foul-smell
- Taking longer to lose the winter coat than normal - this could indicate early Cushings disease
- Slow to get-up from lying down - don't ignore this - often it's a sign that the horse or pony is in some pain from his joints
- Infections which fail to improve - all infections should be taken seriously in geriatric horses.



Additional tips

for giving your older horse a comfortable life

- Make sure they have a nice thick bed to keep them warm and comfortable
- In winter make sure they have a comfortable, light, but warm rug
- Some old horses find it difficult to eat off the floor so raising their buckets can help
- Provide turnout with shelter from the wind and sun - they will appreciate being able to rest in a comfortable environment
- Keep up-to-date with vaccinations such as 'flu and tetanus. Research in other species shows that animals which are vaccinated regularly into older age, live longer and healthier lives
- Softer feeds or feeds with lots of short-chopped fibres can aid digestion
- In some older ponies, their sight starts to fail - whilst few go blind, it does help them to keep their stables, yards and fields free of obstructions and not move things around too much!