

Young At Heart - 10 ways to add years to your senior horse's life

By Toni McAllister

Twenty is the new 15 when it comes to today's horses. With advancements in veterinary medicine and good horsekeeping practices, senior equines are proving that age is just a mindset. Keeping your mature horse going strong takes commitment on your part, but the payoff is partnership for years to come. Use these tips to help keep your veteran young at heart:

A Purpose in Life

Just because he's a little long in the tooth doesn't necessarily mean he's ready for retirement. Seasoned campaigners often put their young brethren to shame, whether it's good behavior in the barn aisle or a blue-ribbon performance in the competitive arena. As examples, a 26-year-old stallion, Siglavy Mantua I, is headlining this year's U.S. tour of the Spanish Riding School of Vienna with a command solo performance; and Giltedge, David O'Connor's famous Olympic mount, took retirement from eventing at the young age of 17 to work as ambassador for equestrian sport at the Kentucky Horse Park. If your vet gives the OK, keep your horse's mind and body going in a suitable career that he enjoys.

Keep Him Moving

Tucking your senior into his cozy stall that's bedded up to his belly may help you rest better, but it's probably not best for him healthwise. To help ward off ailments such as arthritis, obesity and respiratory disease, keep his body in motion with plenty of turnout—optimally, 24/7—for a healthier lifestyle.

More Than a Fleeting Glance

Use your eyes to stave off potentially life-threatening problems by giving your horse a daily once-over. Ask yourself: Is he eating/drinking/behaving like normal? Does he have any wounds, bumps, swelling, skin problems or hoof maladies that need attention? Is he bright and alert? Is he moving out as usual? Seniors don't always bounce back as quickly from injury or illness, so don't hold off on treatment. And don't wait to call your vet if the situation looks serious.

What's On the Menu?

Stemmy, poor-quality hay, weedy pasture and sugary grains ... these are less than ideal food choices for an aging horse because they won't meet his nutritional needs. As horses age, their digestive systems become less efficient, and their ability to absorb and utilize essential nutrients in their feed, especially protein, phosphorus and fiber, decreases. Make smart menu selections, such as good pasture grass supplemented with high-quality hay that is easy to chew and digest, along with complete feeds designed for the senior horse. If your old guy has dental problems—hence chewing problems—you'll have to accommodate him with complete senior feeds and/or hay pellets. Talk to your veterinarian about any special supplements to round out the menu.

Dental Detail

"Mature" horses need thorough dental exams at least once a year, whether there are signs of problems or not. Besides a float, an equine dentist will look for diseases that afflict older horses, such as periodontal disease and tooth decay. If you put off your horse's dental appointment, you could be risking his health. By the time you notice a problem—trouble chewing and dropping food, which lead to weight loss—it may be too late: Tooth surfaces that are severely uneven can be impossible to fix.

Pull Blood

Regular vet visits, which should include blood work, can help ward off disease in your older horse. Cushing's disease, liver and kidney problems, anemia, electrolyte imbalances, insulin resistance, and other senior horse disorders can be detected with blood tests. Hands-on examination can monitor old-age conditions, such as eye disease, dental issues, weight loss, et cetera.

Balanced for Soundness

Reducing your aged horse's workload doesn't mean you can cut back on his hoof care. Even if he's retired to pasture, he still needs trimming/shoeing every six to eight weeks. Keeping hooves balanced can be even more critical in the aged horse that

suffers from debilitating diseases like arthritis, navicular or laminitis, and your farrier can also alert you to any unforeseen hoof problems that might be brewing.

Asset Protection

Lack of shelter during bad weather, pesky parasites, disease and herd rivals are detrimental to your senior's immune system. Don't let him slip: Always provide protection from rain, wind, heat and frigid conditions; stick to a regular deworming program; keep up on insect control; and vaccinate on time.

That's What Friends Are For

Allow your neighborly oldster to flaunt his social skills by giving him equine friends. Letting him partake in normal horseplay with his own kind will improve his quality of life and may just help him live longer. Make sure his pals are well-matched to his "mature" personality to minimize injury and ensure he gets his fair share of food and water.

Lots of Lovin'

While edible treats are fine now and then, give them in moderation. Instead, overindulge him with extra pats and praise for everything that makes him so special. Added benefits: He'll be more eager to please, and spoiling him rotten this way is good for your emotional well-being.

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