



FEEDING OLDER HORSES

Just like humans, horses all age at different rates according to their lifestyle, diet, exercise and genetics. In today's times horses are living longer as research improves our understanding, enabling horses to lead active lives late into their twenties and even thirties.

Just because a horse has reached a certain age, doesn't mean you necessarily need to change their food, the main thing to remember is to treat each horse as an individual.

The daily nutrient requirements of older horses are no different to that of an adult horse so technically you can feed your older horse just as you would have when they were younger, a special food is not necessarily required. However, as a horse ages his digestive system becomes less efficient, so may no longer obtain the full nutritional benefit from the feed or hay which may lead to changes in weight or condition, if this is the case, then it's worth assessing the diet. However before changing anything always consider the impact on your horses' dentition. Like humans, horses only have one set of permanent teeth for their lifetime so routine dental care is of the utmost importance to ensure this one set stays complete and healthy.

Horses have hypsodont teeth, which means they are continuously erupting from the gum. Over time the chewing process wears down each tooth, meaning the older the horse gets the less tooth there is left, which is why older horses may have more issues than their younger counterparts, so it's advisable to have older horses' teeth checked every 6 months.

Signs that there is a dental problem:

- Your horse is quidding forage or dropping feed.
- Your horse has lost weight – although this does not always mean that teeth are the issue. Make sure you schedule a full veterinary check-up, including bloodwork, to rule out any other underlying medical problems. It's important to ascertain the reason why and not just to put it down to "old age".
- Frequent choking



THEIR PERFORMANCE, YOUR SUCCESS



Always Start with Forage

The most overlooked component of the diet is forage (hay, grazing, forage products such as chaffs, cubes, beet pulp). As horses age they may find it harder to digest fibre, as the fibre-digesting micro-organisms in the hindgut can become less efficient, so it's important to make sure your older horse or pony has plenty of fibre in the diet to help them maintain digestive health and efficient utilisation of nutrients.

Every horse should get at least 1.5% of body weight per day but for older horses this may need to increase to at least 2-2.5% depending on the horse. It may also be worth considering the type and cut of hay. For example, it may be worth avoiding mature cuts that can be stemmy/stalky and hard to chew in favour of immature cuttings. Immature cuttings also have the advantage of containing higher levels of nutrients which is ideal for the older horse. Lucerne for example is another good option as it is generally higher in calories (energy), protein and amino acids, however, for those with dental issues such as diastema's, essential gaps in the teeth, thicker roughage like lucerne could be an issue.

If the horse has difficulty chewing forage, then you will need to look at replacing or partially supplementing your horse's hay with a forage alternative. If you don't the horse will still lose condition due to simply not consuming enough roughage.

For horses with fairly good teeth higher quantities of shorter fibres in the diet can be used. These include chaff products for example. When using chaffs be sure to check the ingredient profile as some may contain added molasses which may not be suitable for all. Horses with very few teeth left, chaffs can still be tricky and so hay cubes can be the ideal form of roughage as they can be soaked therefore requiring minimal chewing. Fibre is particularly crucial during the winter months as it can add calories and aid in heat production for warmth.

Concentrates

Once the correct amount of forage has been provided, you can take a closer look at concentrates whether a veteran feed or a traditional concentrate. It is important that an older horse's diet matches energy requirements be that for maintenance or providing more fuel for work, just as we would do for younger horses.

When choosing a concentrate for an older horse be sure to look at the energy/calorie source as well as the amount. Feeds that are high in cereal grains can have higher energy values which, for some, may be an advantage as they can consume more calories per kg. So, the amount fed per day could be kept down and still lead to weight gain. Horses without molars have difficulty grinding their feed, so in these cases it may be worth avoiding ingredients with hard outer layers such as whole maize, and sunflower seeds for example.

FOLLOW US



www.epolequine.co.za



THEIR PERFORMANCE, YOUR SUCCESS

Feed containing high levels of grain may also not be ideal for older horses with digestive issues, so look for a feed that is high in fat and fibre which will be more gut friendly and has the benefit of providing “calm” energy should your older horse be more highly strung.

Older horses often have their workloads reduced which can lead to some reduction in muscle tone. Muscle cannot be achieved with feed alone it requires work, so if physically possible, consider some exercise/work for your older horse to maintain condition.

In terms of protein, it's tempting to think that adding more will help maintain muscle tone. However, remember that the quality of the protein is more important than quantity. Feeds rich in essential amino acids (the building blocks of protein), will be far more beneficial in conjunction with exercise in maintaining top-line than high protein feeds with inadequate amino acids. Look for commercial horse feeds that include the amino acids lysine; threonine and methionine.

Not all older horses struggle with maintaining weight, in fact some need to have their feed reduced when workload decreases to avoid obesity issues. One of the most common feeding strategies of overweight horses and ponies is to make significant reductions to the diet but it's important to make sure that the horse still receives a balanced diet and the essential vitamins and minerals they require. Balancers are a great way to provide optimal levels of nutrients in a low intake, low calorie ration.

If your older horse or pony has a history of problems such as laminitis, Cushing's (PPID) or tying-up, this can limit available feeding options. When looking for a suitable concentrate for these horses look for those low in starch

and sugar, with a total NSC under 15%. Note that even though a feed may be labelled “Low/No sugar” it may still be high in starch, making it unsuitable for these types of horses. For example, a product with 18% starch and 0% sugar will have an NSC of roughly 18%, however a feed with 4% sugar and 10% starch will only have an NSC of 14% making it suitable, so be careful to get the right information. Concentrates that are low in NSC but high in fibre and fat will be the best option for these horses, but do consult with a feed adviser before changing as each horse is an individual. Note also that it's not just the concentrate that you need to consider carefully for these horses, even their roughage needs to be low in NSC as this is the largest part of the diet after all. If you are unable to get your hay tested for NSC levels soaking can help to reduce these aspects. Soaking for 30mins fully submerged in water will help to reduce sugar levels without reducing nutrient value. Keep in mind that it's unlikely that soaking alone would reduce the levels enough in hays that are natural high in NSC such as oat hay, and so these types may need to be avoided and alternatives found.

Other feeding recommendations to consider

- Feeding small meals at frequent intervals to keep the horse interested and support digestive efficiency.
- Soaking feeds- Chewing results in saliva production, and saliva moistens the feed so it is easier to swallow, so, if a horse with few teeth tends to rush his feed without much chewing then moistening the feed can help prevent issues. Not much water is needed and the time is minimal if warm water is used. Soften the food, do not make a soup.
- Monitor any changes in your horse's droppings. For example, large fibre strands in the droppings could indicate a reduction in digestive efficiency.

TESTIMONIALS

We are thrilled to offer our support to this amazing Outreach program run by the Highveld Horse Care Unit.

Our essential roughage cube will help add extra roughage into the diets of these hardworking horses and ponies during the winter. Easy to transport and store, they are the perfect product.



FOR SPECIALIST FEEDING ADVICE PLEASE CONTACT:

Leigh Adams: 083 998 6824 | leigh.adams@rclfoods.com
Hannah Botha: 073 423 5491 | hannah.botha@rclfoods.com
Debbie Dick: 076 755 5164 | debbie.dick@rclfoods.com

FOLLOW US     www.epolequine.co.za

