

FACT SHEET

Feeding the Veteran

Like people, not only are horses living longer now, but they are enjoying an active lifestyle for far longer too. As a result, the age old rule of a horse becoming a 'veteran' at 16 years is perhaps no longer applicable. Of course, as with people, horses will age at different speeds, and whilst one may start to struggle in its mid-teens, another may be fit, healthy and remain very active well into their mid or late twenties. This can leave us as owners with a dilemma as to when we need to start feeding 'veteran' or 'senior' feeds. Whilst this is an impossible question to give a generic answer to, probably the best advice is to treat your horse as an individual, and so long as he is getting adequate vitamins and minerals, calories and fibre from his current diet, there is no rush to start feeding a specialist 'veteran' feed earlier than you need.

Dental Issues

Teeth are probably one of the most common problems horse owners face with older horses, and whilst good, regular dental care throughout a horse's life will undoubtedly help delay any serious issues, there is only so much that can be done about wear and tear over a lifetime. Once teeth become badly worn or if some are missing, chewing a long-stem forage may become increasingly difficult for many horses. If you notice bits of partially chewed hay/haylage dropping from your horse's mouth or scattered round his net, this is a tell-tale sign that he is struggling to cope. It is important to take action at this point to ensure that sufficient fibre is kept flowing through the digestive system, but also to avoid the risk of impaction colic occurring as a result of poorly chewed forage. A solution is to consider feeding a short chop product which is easier to chew but will still supply high levels of fibre without an increase in sugar and starch levels. Consider a product that can be used either as a chaff to add additional fibre to your bucket feed, or as a partial hay replacer for those that are struggling with their hay or haylage.

Even for those elderly horses that are still coping with a long-stem forage, it is important to remember that it is unlikely they are chewing as efficiently as they once were. This, combined with the fact that their digestive system probably won't be absorbing nutrients quite so well, makes it important to feed the best quality and most digestible forage possible. A good quality, bagged forage made from ryegrass can be a good choice for individuals who need a little help with their weight as it will be easy to chew and will provide a consistent level of calories, fibre and nutrients. For those who are still doing well with their weight, choose a lower calorie bagged forage. The added advantage of feeding a bagged forage is that it will be dust-free. Older horses that may have been exposed to dusty forages over the years may be more sensitive to any form of dust in later life and poor quality forage is a known offender when it comes to high dust/mould spore levels.

A lot of senior/veteran feeds are higher in calories than the maintenance or low energy feeds which many leisure horses are fed, and as a result of this, starch levels are often increased as well. This can have the potential to cause problems for the elderly horse's digestive system. As discussed above, elderly horses often have a decreased fibre intake (whether due to loss of appetite, inability to chew, or poor digestive system efficiency); add onto this an increased starch intake, and suddenly the chances of disturbance to the bacteria in the hindgut is much higher. The result of this may result in symptoms such as loose droppings or colic.

Top Tips for Veteran Horses

- Think carefully about your forage choices; ensure what you are providing is consistently clean, nutritious and palatable.
- Try to keep cereal-based feeds to a minimum and when required, provide additional calories through fibre and oil sources.
- Ensure teeth are checked regularly.
- Ensure you stick to a good worming routine as worm burden and damage in older horses can cause serious problems.
- Don't let your oldie get cold! Your horse burns huge amounts of calories trying to keep himself warm over the winter.
- Consider feeding digestive enhancers to help him digest his feed as efficiently as possible.