

# AT A GLANCE

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# Caring for Senior Horses

By Christa Lesté-Lasserre, MA

An older horse is just a horse ... with experience! He can still work, and even compete, as long as he hasn't accumulated too many health issues during his life journey. But caring for the older horse can require special attention to his needs.



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## THE AGING BODY

As the equine body ages, certain parts will need more care. Pay particular attention to these areas in your seniors ▶



KEITH LARSON



COURTESY, BEND EQUINE MEDICAL CENTER

## Did you know?

Many “geriatric” horses are good at hiding their pain and problems. Some only act “grumpy” or depressed, and others won't show signs at all. Researchers have found that owners often aren't aware of their aging horses' health issues, despite having a close bond with them.



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BODY AREA	EFFECT OF AGING	COMMON ISSUES
<b>TEETH</b>	Excessive wear, loosening, fractures	Moving teeth, abnormal chewing, bacterial infections, bad breath, nasal discharge, colic, equine odontoclastic tooth resorption and hypercementosis (EOTRH)
<b>TENDONS AND LIGAMENTS</b>	Breakdown of microscopic structures	Sprains, strains, lameness, reduced performance
<b>JOINTS</b>	Loss of protein quality in cartilage, inflammation	Osteoarthritis, bone spurs, pain, stiffness
<b>EYES</b>	Greater susceptibility to ocular disease	Corneal ulcers, uveitis, cataracts, glaucoma, general vision problems
<b>BODY CONDITION/ NUTRITION</b>	Muscle bulk replaced by fat, increased susceptibility to stress, reduced nutritional intake	Extreme body condition scores (BCS). On a scale of 1-9: overweight (6 to 9), underweight (1 to 4)
<b>IMMUNE SYSTEM</b>	Reduced natural immunity to pathogens	Infectious diseases, intestinal parasites, lice
<b>ENDOCRINE SYSTEM</b>	Increased insulin resistance	Insulin dysregulation, equine metabolic syndrome (EMS), pituitary pars intermedia dysfunction (PPID, or equine Cushing's), laminitis

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### Caring for SENIOR Horses

The working senior won't recover as easily from his athletic efforts, so keep the following pointers in mind:

- **Warm up and cool down before and after exercise.** Prepare the musculoskeletal system with five-minute "carrot stretches" followed by walking and trotting in straight lines. Cool down after work with leisurely walks on loose reins.
- **Ice his injuries and problem areas.** Years of working and competing can lead to injuries and inflammation. Know your horse's weak areas, and ice them for 15 minutes after exercise.
- **Monitor his body weight.** Too heavy, he's at increased risk of metabolic disease and musculoskeletal injuries. Too light, he's not coping with the stress and workload (and might have dental issues). Adapt work and feed to keep him around a 5 out of 9 BCS.
- **Give him regular turnout.** Letting him move and exercise on his own will keep him fitter and less stiff for work.
- **Reduce his workload.** He can still work but no longer at the same level. Fewer hours and lower intensity will give him more active years.
- **Protect him from infectious diseases.** Keep his vaccines up-to-date, minimize travel, avoid contact and shared equipment with unfamiliar or at-risk horses, and stay informed about outbreaks.

**DON'T** assume your older horse's health issues are "just because he's getting old."

**DO** maintain a good relationship with your veterinarian and discuss any new problems or developments to diagnose and treat as early as possible.

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**DAILY USE** of non-steroidal anti-inflammatories (NSAIDs) such as phenylbutazone (Bute) or firocoxib under veterinary direction can keep painful horses more comfortable (but watch out for stomach irritation as a result).

**JOINT INJECTIONS** such as polysulfated glycosaminoglycan (PSGAG) and hyaluronic acid (HA) can provide relief for up to several months when injected directly into the joint.



MICHELLE ANDERSON



**NUTRITIONAL SUPPLEMENTS** might improve joint health and other age-related issues. For example, researchers have found that omega-3 fatty acids (like those found in **flaxseed**) appear to help reduce inflammation. However, some supplements still lack scientific confirmation. Seek advice from a veterinarian or equine nutritionist.

A photograph of a woman in a black jacket and grey pants standing next to a brown horse wearing a blue blanket. They are on a dirt path in a wooded area. The Back on Track logo is overlaid in the top right corner of the image.

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