

FEEDING THE AGED HORSE

By Dr John Kohnke BVSc RDA

CONTRIBUTORS:
Georgia Leva BSc (Zoology)
Dr. Philippa Kohnke BSc PhD

IN THIS FACTSHEET

- **A good basic ration for an aged horse**
- **Common causes of poor health in older horses**
- **Digestive Inefficiency: why elderly horses need more feed & supplements**
- **Feeding the aged horse still in work**



Pictured: Happy and healthy 29 year old Oscar. A well-balanced diet and quality supplements can help support the long-term health and vitality of senior horses.

The aging process in horses usually occurs over a period of years. Some horses appear old at 12 years of age, whilst others are still active and lightly ridden up to 25 years or older. In their last years of light or regular exercise, many older schoolmasters or senior pony club ponies guide a younger or inexperienced rider with their steady behaviour and gentle wisdom. Feeding these older horses a suitable ration with extra care and attention to their health and well-being can make all the difference when that well earned retirement is reached.

Once an aged horse has retired to paddock life, continued attention to their health through dietary management can ensure optimal condition and vitality, which is essential for well-being, but can also avoid unnecessary veterinary bills or the difficulty in managing an elderly horse in poor health. An aged and retired horse at pasture may fall away in condition quickly during winter when the weather is cold and the grass is sparse, despite adequate shelter and supplementary feeding. Even in summer, elderly horses

Summary

It is essential to feed a diet most suited to the age, breed, level of training and competition level of any horse. This is very important for senior or aged horses, especially during cold wintery weather.

As horses age, their nutritional requirements change and digestive efficiency may be reduced. Providing a diet to maintain their health, vitality and immunity will help support them in their senior years.

A sound management plan with regular dental checks, worming and trimming or shoeing, as well as grooming and general health checks, are important to help ensure the quality of life and longevity of an aged horse.

Keeping your senior horse happy and healthy ensures a long and comfortable retirement after they are no longer in active training or competition.

DID YOU KNOW???

Poor dental health, including the loss of teeth, is the most common problem which affects feeding efficiency and well-being of an aged horse. Up to 33% of aged horses decline in health and pass away because of poor teeth and secondary septicaemia due to infected teeth and gums.

KOHNKE'S OWN FACTSHEET N1 – FEEDING THE AGED HORSE

may have trouble maintaining weight and proper manure production due to poor digestive health, especially when pasture is very succulent (or overgrazed and dry). Drought conditions are particularly hard for aged horses compared to their younger companions. Unfortunately, once an aged horse loses condition, it is often difficult to regain their weight, even on a higher energy ration.

Common Causes for Weight Loss or Poor Health

There are several causes which can impair an older horse's ability maintain a healthy weight when grazing, even if they have been provided with both hay or hard feed. It is important to ensure that your elderly horse obtains the full value of nutrients from their diet, including energy sources as well as good quality protein, minerals, trace-minerals and vitamins. Maximising the ability of an aged horse to digest their food and maintain optimum hind gut function can significantly improve their health as they age.

Poor Teeth Condition

In most cases, an aged horse will have worn down or lost some teeth, reducing its ability to chew whole raw grains and dry long-stemmed hay. A horse which has been kept on sandy areas, or one which 'windsucks' on fences, will generally wear its teeth down more quickly, showing the effects of poor teeth at an earlier age. Poor teeth condition can lead to increased risk of colic and digestive problems in an older horse.

It is a good idea to carefully observe an aged horse when eating for signs of teeth problems – such as dropping feed (also known as 'quidding'), slow chewing and slobbering when eating and passing grain or long straws more than 2.5 cm in its droppings.

Loose or Watery Manure

Many aged horses develop a reduced ability to adsorb water from their hind gut or suffer 'Irritable Bowel Syndrome' due to feed or medication sensitivities. High lucerne diets are beneficial to supply calcium and good quality protein needed by an aging horse, but can cause a change in their droppings to a more 'water-saturated' consistency. This is because lucerne fibre soaks up and holds less water in its fibrous structure compared to grass or cereal hay, leaving more free water in the hind gut. This, when combined with a lower ability to adsorb water, can cause softer and 'sloppy' droppings which can coat their buttocks, tail-swish and rear of their hind limbs. The particles of waste in this form of watery droppings are often still well digested and have no abnormal odour, as they simply contain a higher moisture content.

In the longer term, an Irritable Bowel-Like Syndrome or 'leaky gut syndrome' can cause reduced water uptake to maintain blood needs. Anti-inflammatory medications, such as 'bute', can also have more significant side-effects on aged horses, as compared to younger horses, by causing water leakage from the blood back to the hindgut and producing even more watery, loose manure. It is important to monitor the manure formation of an aged or elderly horse as it is a key sign of hindgut health and function.

HANDY HINT: Use Kohnke's Own FABBY to support digestive efficiency

Digestive efficiency is reduced as a horse ages, they are no longer able to absorb important nutrients and may also be subject to loose manure or diarrhoea. It is often harder for an older horse to maintain a good body condition. Kohnke's Own FABBY helps to optimise digestion, improve feed utilisation and minimize the risk of poorly digested, runny manure in older horses. FABBY contains concentrated live probiotics, plus a range of prebiotics for optimal hindgut health and function in all horses.



KOHNKE'S OWN FACTSHEET N1 – FEEDING THE AGED HORSE

Arthritic Conditions and Reduced Mobility

Pain and discomfort from earlier injuries resulting in arthritis may restrict a horse's ability to walk to graze and harvest its own feed, especially in cold weather. Older horses with restricted or painful movement are at risk of losing condition from poor appetite combined with a lack of adequate grazing ability and may not take part in normal herd activities. Continuing with some light, regular exercise for older horses, or encouraging continued grazing in elderly horses, will help to keep arthritic joints flexible.

Many older horses with skeletal injury or chronic arthritis are prescribed 'bute' or other anti-inflammatory medications to make them more comfortable and enable walking to grazing or perform light exercise. However, these medications may have more serious side-effects, such as leaky gut syndrome, in aged horses with declining health. A good quality joint supplement provided daily can help horses feel more comfortable, reduce inflammation due to arthritic conditions and maintain willingness to move and graze more freely.

Heavy Worm Burdens

It is common that aged horses can develop heavy worm burdens as a horse's natural immunity to worms wanes with increasing age. Many older horses in a group can become less dominant and drop to a lower position in a herd 'pecking-order' and are often forced to graze closer to manure heaps which can be contaminated with migrating infective Small Strongyle larvae. When combined with poor teeth and short, succulent grass, an aged horse can quickly develop ill-thrift and loss of condition. Worm older horses every 6 – 8 weeks and adopt strict pasture hygiene to reduce worm egg and larval ingestion during grazing.

Reduced Digestive Efficiency

As a horse ages, its digestive efficiency can decrease significantly. This can affect the ability and balance of the hind gut microbiota populations which will decrease fibre digestibility, therefore reducing the energy supplied by grass, grain and hay. The older horse also requires more energy for everyday activities, such as walking and maintaining body heat, as it can have reduced body fat and skin insulation from loss of body condition, especially when grazing in winter.

An aged horse also requires higher levels of good quality protein, as well as increased amounts of calcium and phosphorus, in its ration compared to a younger adult horse under similar conditions. This is because digestion and uptake of these nutrients becomes less efficient as a horse ages past 16 years of age. The energy density and protein quality of the ration should therefore be increased to maintain vitality, ability to exercise and a reasonable body condition, especially during cold weather over winter. A good quality comprehensive supplement with essential bone minerals, trace-minerals and vitamins is also highly recommended to ensure continuing good health and vitality, as the digestive absorption and utilisation of these critical nutrients may wane with advancing age.

Providing Extra Feed during Winter

Often succulent, short winter pasture has a lower energy level which is not adequate to maintain condition in aged horses with reduced digestive efficiency. A 'hard feed' at least once a day may need to be provided. Giving a very senior horse over 27-30 years of age a hard feed both morning and evening during very cold weather will help to

HANDY HINT: A Daily Joint Supplement is Recommended

Providing a supplement to nutritionally support your horse's joint health is also helpful to maintain mobility and well-being. Kohnke's Own® Redi-Flex® is an innovative joint supplement for horses that contains over 10 specific joint active ingredients, all of which have a role in maintaining total joint health, flexibility and freedom of movement. Redi-Flex has been extensively trialled with exceptional results, including in horses suffering from arthritis.



HANDY HINT – Check teeth on a regular basis

Arrange with your vet to check the teeth of an aged horse every 3 – 6 months, and correct any problems, such as stepped mouth, which may interfere with chewing and therefore directly affect the efficiency of feed utilisation.

KOHNKE'S OWN FACTSHEET N1 – FEEDING THE AGED HORSE

maintain warmth and condition. **It is commonly advised to feed more hay to all horses in winter, to maintain body warmth by providing extra fibre which is digested by heat-producing hindgut fermentation. However, it is unwise to provide more than ½ a biscuit of hay per 100 kg body weight to an elderly horse. Too much hay and mature stalky roughage can 'bulk out' the hind gut and reduce its digestive efficiency.**

It is more effective to add additional grain, especially the slow energy release of steam-rolled or steam-flaked barley. Sugary feeds or faster energy release forms such as micronised or extruded corn or barley can cause insulin surges which may not be appropriate for aged ponies or other sugar-sensitive horses. Swapping extra hay for additional grain in a hard feed which includes chaff will quickly boost overall energy to maintain body condition and reserves of energy for generating warmth.

Other Ways to Help Aged Horses

Weekly evaluation of condition, pasture value and monitoring grazing time, combined with regular worming, hoof trimming and teeth checks, will help ensure that an aged horse is able to maintain itself in a healthy condition.

If possible, a stable or wind proof paddock shelter with dry bedding can maximise overnight comfort and thus also reduce the drain of energy experienced by older horses as they try to stay warm during winter. An insulated, quilted weather-proof rug is also recommended to help prevent excess energy and heat loss during cold overnight temperatures. Many aged horses are kept continually rugged during winter, so it is important to regularly remove the rug to check body weight, skin health and good general condition.

HANDY HINT: Increased Coat Length during Cold Weather

The onset of shorter daylength and cooler nights in autumn naturally stimulates a horse's hair coat to grow longer and thicker. The 'winter woolly' coat provides protection against excessive heat loss during the winter months. Powering the growth of this extra hair over the 3.5 square metres of body surface area of the averaged sized horse can drain energy and protein reserves. As an older horse needs more energy to grow hair and maintain body warmth, you may find that body condition or general health is negatively impacted during the 'coat growing' period. Keen attention to their diet, including energy and protein sources, will ensure that your aged horse does not start to drop condition in early winter, which can easily lead to further body weight losses during the full winter months.

Basic Ration for an Aged Horse

Grazing and Roughage Needs

Roughage such as grass, hay and chaff supplies fibre, energy and protein. Fibre sources are very important for a functioning gastro-intestinal system, to avoid gastric ulcers and also for physical and mental wellbeing.

Senior horses grazing on good quality pasture may fulfil most of their daily needs for energy just from grass, although body condition should be monitored carefully. On poor quality or over-grazed grass pastures, it may be necessary to also give more hay to provide roughage, energy and protein. However, avoid giving excess hay in an attempt to regain lost condition because it can reduce the efficiency of fibre fermentation, limiting absorption of energy and other dietary nutrients, as well as causing colic and a bloated, 'hay' belly appearance.

Good quality lucerne hay is normally recommended as leafy lucerne has a good protein content and naturally higher calcium, which are required by older horses. If lucerne hay results in soft or watery droppings, then substitute some for grassy hay or grass-clover mixes. Dampening hay with clean water and even soaking for 15 – 20 minutes in water will facilitate chewing and reduce dust and waste, especially if the hay is stalky or coarse.

For an aged horse with poor teeth, lucerne chaff can be provided as part of the roughage needs if the animal is unable to chew hay efficiently. Even if an aged horse has access to good quality pasture and/or hay, they may not maintain good body condition, so it may be necessary to provide a hard feed, preferably at least once a day.

KOHNKE'S OWN FACTSHEET N1 – FEEDING THE AGED HORSE

Recommended Hard Feed

Although a commercial feed for aged horses offers an easy solution with a pre-calculated feeding rate, it can be hard to know which brand and type to select. We recommend to choose a pelleted, extruded or premixed feed with at least 14% Crude Protein (CP), 0.4% calcium and 0.3% phosphorus. However, many branded premixed feeds are expensive and not cost-effective, especially when feeding multiple horses. **The hard feed ration below contains natural grains and other quality ingredients that can be tailored to the age and needs of the horse(s). It is simple to prepare, easy to feed and offers an economical solution that is much cheaper than purchasing a commercial feed.**

Amounts given below can be split in half and offered twice daily. This is especially important for aged horses with poor digestive function and during winter to top-up energy reserves in the morning and night to maintain body warmth. Monitoring the body condition of the horse is essential and minor adjustments may be necessary. For more information and a tailored ration for your horse, contact Kohnke's Own FREE Nutrition Advisory service by Freecall 1800 112 227, email info@kohnkesown.com or through the website www.kohnkesown.com.

HANDY HINT – Comfortable Feeding Environment

Often an aged horse in a group of other horses will be bossed away from feeders by younger, more aggressive horses. Place a couple of feed bins away from the group and encourage the aged horse to eat with fewer companions, or bring it into a yard to feed, so it has more time to slowly and peacefully chew and consume its feed.

Ensure that feed bins are placed on a higher well-drained area, perhaps located in a sheltered area of a hill or tree wind break protected from the cold wind. Common hoof problems, such as hoof-sole abscesses, thrush and greasy heel are often exacerbated by standing or eating on wet or muddy ground.

Horse Type	Grain	Chaff	Extra Protein & Fat	Micronutrients	Extra Supplements
Senior Horse still in Light to Moderate Work ie pony club, riding club, pleasure riding, interschool competitions	Steam-Flaked ¹ Barley 500 – 650 grams per 100 kg bodyweight	Lucerne Chaff Provide as twice the volume of chaff to grain (ie one litre of grain and then 2 litres of chaff)	2 cups full fat soyabean meal for protein OR 3 cups cracked lupins ² for protein and fat	Kohnke's Own Cell-Perform for comprehensive nutrients fulfilling daily needs of bone minerals, trace-minerals and vitamins. Extra antioxidants to support muscle health and function when senior horses are exercising regularly.	Kohnke's Own Muscle XL as an amino acid supplement for good top-line and muscle tone in working horses. Kohnke's Own Redi-Flex for joint health and freedom of movement during light-moderate exercise.
Aged Horse at Rest in the Paddock, Not in Work	Steam-Flaked Barley 375 grams per 100 kg bodyweight	For horses with poor teeth, consider dampening with oil or water to assist chewing	2 cups full fat soyabean meal for protein AND 125 – 250 ml of oil as a fat source for poorly conditioned horses ³ . Kohnke's Own Energy Gold oil blend is recommended for extra benefits.	Kohnke's Own Cell-Provide for bone-minerals, trace-mineral and vitamins that is especially useful for aged horses with reduced digestive efficiency. Pelleted and palatable for easy chewing even in elderly horses.	Kohnke's Own Muscle XL as an amino acid supplement to maintain top-line and muscle condition in aged horses with reduce protein absorption. Kohnke's Own Redi-Flex for joint health to ensure a comfortable retirement and soundness to graze and enjoy herd activities.
Elderly and Retired Horses with Poor Digestive Function	Steam-Flaked Barley 650 grams per 100 kg bodyweight Can also boil same amount of barley for more freely available energy and easier chewing consistency.				Kohnke's Own FABBY for digestive efficiency to maintain body condition and reduce digestive upsets including loose manure.

1. Steam-flaked barley is also called steam-rolled barley
2. Although a good source of protein and fat, lupins may cause sour droppings in some horses
3. Vegetable or canola oil are suitable. Introduce oil slowly at 25 mls per day increasing every 3 days until full amount is reached.

KOHNKE'S OWN FACTSHEET N1 – FEEDING THE AGED HORSE

DID YOU KNOW???

Even when feeding a commercial pelleted feed for aged horses, it is often beneficial to give a 'top up' dose of a quality ration balancing supplement as well, in order to maximise the digestive capability of the vitamins and minerals and to correct any shortfalls commonly associated with processing and storage of premixed cooked or sweetened feeds. Although the cooking process used to make most commercial feeds, such as extrusion or heat-pelleting, helps increase the readily available energy in the feed, it can destroy sensitive vitamins and other important nutrients.

Provide A Vitamin and Mineral Supplement

A good quality bone mineral, trace-mineral and vitamin supplement is highly recommended to provide your aged horse with essential nutrients that are often not as easily absorbed as digestive efficiency wanes. Providing these micronutrients is important to ensure the health, vitality and longevity of the aged horse, and is especially crucial for horses still in light to moderate work.

Kohnke's Own Cell-Provide is a top quality comprehensive nutritional supplement formulated for aged and senior horses. It contains a well-balanced mix of bone minerals, trace-minerals and vitamins in an easy to eat pelleted supplement. The nutrients in Cell-Provide are specially chosen for their



easily absorbed, high potency forms, such as organic chelated trace-minerals and pH-stabilised vitamins, to ensure optimum nutrient content. Cell-Provide is highly palatable so it can even be fed off the hand for older horses at grass. Cell-Provide is also concentrated, only 40 grams is needed for aged horses (500 kg body weight), and has a very economical cost per dose.

Care of School Master and All-Rounder Ponies

In many cases, older horses and ponies may still be used for light pleasure riding, for example, teaching children to ride and gain skill and confidence. Some school master horses are still actively competing at over 20 years of age in a moderate level of competition. These horses are exceptional and must be provided with a good quality diet (see table) as well as management plan to help support their health, vitality and competitive soundness.

A tailored diet to suit each schoolmaster horse or child's pony is vital, particularly as some older thoroughbred types find it hard to maintain weight, especially when compared to naturally 'good doer' pony breeds. All diets should include a good quality source of roughage, protein, energy as well as all essential vitamins and trace-minerals for health and vitality. For the working schoolmaster or senior pony club pony, Kohnke's Own Cell-Perform offers the same high potency micronutrients as Cell-Provide, but with the extra benefits of more antioxidants and other muscle health nutrients for muscle function, strength and stamina. It is highly recommended for older horses which are still performing light or regular exercise.



In particular, many owners of older performance horses and ponies find it difficult to maintain soundness, flexibility and freedom of movement to enable training and competition. It is important not to over-work these types of horses and riding on an even, well maintained surface with ideal depth and cushioning will help to reduce impact on aged joints and tendons. The use of other treatments such as post work ice boots, regular body work and a good quality joint supplement, such as Kohnke's Own Redi-Flex, can also help to preserve the longevity of these special 'schoolmaster' horses and ponies.

Disclaimer and Usage Information ©JOHN KOHNKE PRODUCTS 2020

The information in this document have been presented as a guideline based on the veterinary experience and knowledge of the author, Dr John Kohnke BVSc RDA. Whilst all care and diligence have been taken to produce this information, the author/editor, Dr John Kohnke, accepts no responsibility or liability for unforeseen consequences resulting from the advice recommended.

The information in this fact sheet, or part thereof, downloaded from the website www.kohnkesown.com, can be used in newsletters and other horse/pony club or association bulletins, provided that the source of the fact sheet is acknowledged as courtesy of the author, Dr. John Kohnke BVSc RDA, from the website www.kohnkesown.com, and that the information is not altered or edited. The information cannot be used for magazine publication unless permission is sought from the author by email info@kohnkesown.com prior to publication.