



info@tryonequine.com
www.tryonequine.com

P.O. Box 547 / 3689 Landrum Road
Columbus, NC 28722

Office (828) 894-6065
Fax (828) 894-6302

How Should I Care for my Older Horse During Winter Months?

With advances in nutrition, management and health care, horses and ponies are living well into their 20's and 30's. These geriatric horses are able to live a happy and healthy retirement with proper management and attention from their owners. These key factors will help ensure that you are providing the best care for your beloved older horse.

Environment

Many older horses are retired to a big field where they can get plenty of exercise and fresh air. Others prefer to be part of the daily interactions of the barn and are kept inside. Each of these environments offers advantages and disadvantages. Turnout allows an opportunity for appropriate exercise to maintain muscle tone, flexibility and mobility. This can be especially important for the older horse as arthritis and degenerative joint disease set in. This management style can be ideal during the warmer months but it is important to pay close attention to these horses once the temperatures drop as they still require daily care and attention. It is also imperative that there is available shelter to protect them from the wind, rain and cold. In contrast, horses stabled indoors must have adequate ventilation to keep them from developing respiratory conditions and a regular turnout or exercise program is essential.

Nutrition

As horses age, their digestive systems become less efficient. Hormonal and metabolic changes affect or interfere with their ability to digest, absorb and utilize essential nutrients in their feed, especially protein, phosphorous and fiber. Many older horses benefit from complete rations with built-in roughage that are specially formulated to compensate for changes in their digestive physiology. A highly palatable, 12-14% protein feed that is easy to chew and swallow is ideal. The feed should contain enough high quality fiber to aid digestion, provide essential minerals including calcium and phosphorus in the correct ratio and include all essential vitamins. A vegetable fat source is important to promote healthy skin and hair, aid digestion and boost energy intake. Most commercially formulated senior feeds will meet these criteria but if you have any doubt, discuss your horse's diet with your veterinarian.

Water is one of the most important aspects of your horse's nutrition. During the winter months it is important that the water provided is not too cold for your horse to drink. Providing plenty of fresh, tepid to warm water will prevent conditions like dehydration and colic.

Health Care

A biannual physical exam by your veterinarian can be hugely beneficial in identifying problems before they start. The dental exam is very important in older horses to be sure that they are able to apprehend and chew their food properly. These appointments will also include a fecal exam to identify parasitic infestations that can be efficiently targeted with specific treatment.

As with any horse, hoof care is of paramount importance. While your older horse may be able to go longer between trims, it is critical that a regular schedule is maintained with your farrier to prevent lameness and injury.

Grooming

Observing your horse on a regular basis can identify early problems. Daily grooming allows the perfect opportunity for assessment while also promoting circulation and skin health. Watch for changes in body condition, behavior and attitude. Adjust rations to maintain proper body condition. A good rule of thumb is to be able to feel the ribs but not see them.

Older horses are prone to tumors. Look for any unusual lumps or growths from head to tail as well as beneath the tail. Grey horses are predisposed to melanoma and this is a common site for tumors that you may want to discuss with your veterinarian.

While there is much you can do to keep your older horse healthy, some conditions associated with aging require medical intervention. A quick response to ailments, injuries or a decline in fitness can keep your older horse from having a serious or prolonged set back. That means less worry for you and better quality of life for your old friend.

Answered By: [Meghan Breen, DVM](#)