

Nutrition and your senior horse



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Remember, each horse is an individual and will have their own specific nutritional needs. With that in mind, there are several categories into which seniors can be divided based on their nutritional needs¹⁻³

The senior that is healthy and an ideal weight

- Healthy senior at an ideal weight who is still used for performance and/or reproduction.
- Continue what you're doing, as long as it's balanced and meeting your senior's needs.
- 1.5-2.5% of body weight (on a dry matter basis) of a good quality forage should be enough to keep your senior in good condition. Provide free access to water, salt and a forage balancer.
- Concentrate feed is only required for those that are not maintaining weight on forage, or for those with dental problems that interfere with feeding
- Monitor body condition score and body weight with a weight tape every week to quickly catch any changes



The overweight/obese senior

- Senior horse that is overweight or obese, but otherwise healthy.
- Overweightness and obesity are associated with the development of unfavourable metabolic changes and increased disease risk. It is important to restore an ideal body condition in these horses.
- Schedule a veterinary visit to rule out any underlying problem contributing to weight gain
- Work with your veterinarian and/or an equine nutritionist to develop a weight loss plan, which usually involves restricting feed intake (especially through pasture) and/or eliminating any concentrate feed the horse is receiving.
- Providing free access to water and salt. A good quality forage balancer is essential when restricting feed intake.
- Increase the horse's physical activity. Choose a method that works best for your senior (in-hand, loose, ridden) and be consistent. Consider splitting the exercise into several short sessions each day and introduce exercise gradually to avoid overwork.



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- Consider management techniques to increase physical activity and/or prevent boredom between feedings:
 - Hay nets and slow feeders can increase the time the horse spends foraging
 - Provide frequent small meals
 - Separate forage in different piles to encourage movement
 - Provide a play ball or toy with a small handful of high-fibre pellets between feedings. This feed should be included as part of the horse's calculated feed allowance according to the weight loss plan.

The senior that is losing condition

- Senior horse that is difficult to keep weight on with a normal diet, but otherwise healthy.
- Schedule a veterinary visit to rule out underlying problems (e.g. parasite or dental problems) and for nutritional advice.
- Monitor your herd. Your senior may have lost dominance in the herd and may have less access to feed. If so, provide alternative feeding arrangements.
- Gradually increase the calories and nutrients in your horse's diet. The horse should receive around 2.5% of body weight (on a dry matter basis) of good quality forage (hay analysis is recommended). Highly palatable hay, may increase the horse's appetite. Hay based cubes/pellets may also be beneficial to include in the diet.
- A concentrate feed may be necessary. These should include good quality protein e.g. (10-14%, preferably from soybean meal or legumes) and added vegetable oil/fat (7-10%).
- Provide free access to water, salt and a forage balancer. The type/amount of balancer required depends on the vitamin and mineral content of the concentrate feed.
- Including sweet smelling/tasting feed toppings may increase feed intake.⁴ Including odours that the horse already knows may increase the acceptance of new foods.⁵



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Senior with health problems (the geriatric horse)

- Different conditions will require different nutritional management strategies, and this is further complicated by the current status of the horse (e.g. obese, dental problems, etc.).
- A consult with your veterinarian is essential to treat and address any conditions that your senior may have.
- Your veterinarian may suggest a nutrition plan based on your senior's individual needs. It will be easier for your veterinarian to assess your senior's needs if you have kept detailed records of health checks, behaviour, body condition scores, body weight and feeding programs.
- Your veterinarian will address any discomfort issues, such as pain in horses with arthritis, which may be causing decreased appetite
- Management techniques, such as elevated feed stations and separation during feeding, may be helpful for horses with difficulty eating due to pain
- Generally, diets high in cereal or water soluble carbohydrates should be avoided



For All Senior Horses

- Provide loose salt vs. a salt lick as many senior horses have a dry mouth (drier mouth) and the loose salt is easier for them.
- Perform body condition scoring regularly and watch for changes in muscle development (loosing muscle).

Visit the [Senior Horse Challenge Healthcare tool](#) by Equine Guelph to learn more.

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4. van den Berg, M., Giagos, V., Lee, C., Brown, W. Y., Cawdell-Smith, A. J., & Hinch, G. N. (2016a). The influence of odour, taste and nutrients on feeding behaviour and food preferences in horses. *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 184, 41-50.
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