Is 20 the new 10?

How horses age has a lot to do with their luck in the genetic lottery, but factors such as nutrition, medical and dental care, and lifestyle can enhance—and even extend—their years.

“Historically, horses were considered old when they reached their teens,” says Joe Pagan, PhD, president of Kentucky Equine Research in Versailles, Ky. “Now, with advances in parasite control, nutrition, and general care, horses are still working into their late teens and early 20s and can continue to be active well beyond what we previously thought. The term ‘geriatric’ is a misnomer. Aging is not an illness; it’s only when there are physical dysfunctions and illness that an older horse should be labeled geriatric.”

Robert Holland, DVM, PhD, Pfizer Equine Technical Service veterinarian and author of the book Understanding the Older Horse, published by Eclipse Press, agrees. “I had a horse that lived until age 42,” he says. “We competed in endurance riding into his late 20s, but it was because he was sound. Healthy older horses still need a job to do; they still need to feel they belong in order to provide them the motivation to go on.”

If your horse is a youngster, start now with a regimen of parasite control, suitable nutrition, annual wellness exams, vaccinations, and preventive dental care to pave the way for a long, healthy life.
If your horse is already a senior, there’s no reason to turn him out to pasture. Here’s a seasonal look at some factors to consider for the care of your equine elder.

Winter
The basics of shelter, food, and water become even more critical for older horses in the temperature and weather extremes of winter months.

**Gimme shelter ... and some H 2O** “Stalling an older horse can be problematic, especially if he’s arthritic,” suggests Sarah Ralston, VMD, MS, PhD, Dipl. ACVN, an associate professor in the Department of Animal Sciences at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, in New Brunswick. “It can exacerbate stiffness, and for horses that have trouble lying down, it increases their chances of getting cast (lodged) against the wall. A better option is to have a sturdy, deep, three-sided run-in shed and blanket your horse if needed. Allowing them to move freely seems to help their joints remain lubricated and loose.”

Ralston also advises owners to pay special attention to ensuring their older horses have adequate water intake in cold weather. “Those not getting enough water for digestive processes can be subject to constipation and impaction colic problems,” says Ralston.

Older horses can be more sensitive to water temperature, and contrary to old wives’ tales, horses cannot get adequate water from snow consumption. Trough heaters and heated individual water buckets with chew-proof, conduit-covered electrical cords are widely available for keeping water drinkable in cold weather; for safety, be sure heaters are plugged into a ground fault circuit interrupter (GFCI) outlet, and secure any loose cords.

**What’s for dinner?** Combine common sense with veterinary diagnostics when feeding seniors. “There is some confusion with regard to horses, aging, and feeds,” says Pagan. “As long as the horse appears healthy and happy, I’d recommend continuing with a regular adult equine nutritional program. It’s when a horse is showing signs of aging, or clinical symptoms of metabolic disorders, that an owner needs to address it with veterinary diagnostics.”

Developing a sound nutritional program for a geriatric horse can be quite complex, and playing a guessing game is not recommended. “It’s important to know exactly what problems your aging horse has before changing his diet,” says Ralston. “For example, horses excrete excess calcium via their kidneys, so alfalfa isn’t recommended for horses with kidney dysfunction. Sweet feeds should be avoided for horses with pituitary dysfunction (i.e., Cushing’s, because their high sugar content can stimulate extreme blood sugar and insulin changes), and bran is another potential kidney stressor because of the high phosphorus content. In addition, some high-sugar ‘senior’ feeds have been reported to exacerbate liver dysfunction.”

**So, what can you feed?** “Timothy is a good hay for elder horses, It can be easy to miss what’s going on under that thick winter coat, so conduct hands-on inspections regularly throughout the winter to detect and prevent unwanted weight loss/gain in your horse.

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**KEY POINTS FOR OLDER HORSE CARE**

**WINTER**
- **Shelter** Use pasture and run-in with cold-weather blanketing rather than stall to avoid casting.
- **Water** Ensure adequate consumption, use conduit-corded trough heaters or heated buckets plugged into ground fault circuit interrupter (GFCI) outlets for safety.
- **Feed**
  - Normal adult rations are appropriate for healthy older horses.
  - Use diagnostic tests when problems arise to determine the best diet.
  - Quality grass hays are best in winter for providing warmth due to their fermentation in the hindgut.
- **Body condition** Conduct hands-on inspections regularly throughout the winter to detect and prevent unwanted weight loss/gain.

**SPRING**
- **Wellness exam** Ask your veterinarian to perform a complete blood count (CBC) for red/white blood cell analysis, serum chemistry panel for renal and liver function, vaccinations, and an oral exam.

**SUMMER**
- **Deworming** Use a program suitable for your horses, climate, and pasture scenario.
- **Keep horses comfortable** Clip body hair if needed, use fans or misting equipment, and secure electrical cords.

**AUTUMN**
- **Deworm** Select products that work against bots, tapeworms, and strongylies, and deworm based on your veterinarian’s recommendations and a fecal egg count; manually remove any bot eggs.
- **Second wellness exam and oral exam** Oral exams are especially important to rule out dental problems that could precipitate weight loss or health decline when heading into winter. –Lisa Kemp
Respecting Our Elders

as are high-quality grass hays,” Ralston advises. “They’re usually pretty safe for old horses, although your horse might require some supplementation with concentrates to meet energy and protein needs. Fifty percent alfalfa mixes are okay, provided there is no evidence of kidney failure.”

Pagan concurs. “Many older horses are sensitive to the sugars and starches found in grain,” he says. “It can be better to focus on forage (fermentable fiber) and fats.

“Horses pastured outside might need more food in winter since they’re burning more energy to keep warm,” continues Pagan. “Hay and forages ferment in the hindgut (colon), providing warmth from the inside out. Grains don’t; so feeding your horse extra grain won’t give him the resources for extra body heat. He’ll just shiver for warmth instead, which can be exhausting for the older horse.”

For horses with poor teeth, consider forage cubes or pellets, adding warm water to make a soupy mash.

**Weight watching** Another part of your winter routine should include body condition assessment. Furry coats can mask weight loss until the spring, so you should regularly run your hands over key fat indicator spots such as the horse’s rib area, tailhead, shoulders, withers, and neck. It can be difficult for an older horse to come back from unnecessary weight loss or gain, and excessive weight can precipitate an unhealthy condition or exacerbate joint conditions like arthritis.

**Spring**

The old once-over Early spring is a good time for an older horse’s wellness exam. Holland recommends annual diagnostics to catch problems early. “If you catch things earlier, you can treat them when they’re less serious,” he says. “The basics for older horses are an annual CBC (complete blood count) to monitor red and white blood cell count (indicative of general health status and immunity), preventive vaccinations, and a serum chemistry panel to monitor renal and liver function.”

Even if your old guy never leaves the farm, vaccinations are essential. Viruses can travel back to your stable via other horses, barn equipment, water buckets … even your clothes. The American Association of Equine Practitioners (AAEP) Web site provides a comprehensive chart of recommendations regarding both preventive and risk-based vaccinations (search for adult horse vaccination chart at www.aaep.org). You can use it as a starting point for discussion with your veterinarian as to what vaccinations your older horse needs for prevention or outbreak mitigation.

**Summer**

Whether your region gets only a few weeks of warmth per year or is balmy year-round, you’ve got opportunities and pitfalls to consider for your old mare, gelding, or stallion.

Warm weather deworming In the northern United States and similar climates, one of the most important things you can do in the summer months is deworm for strongyles to prevent fall pasture contamination with larvae. Most veterinarians agree on the importance of parasite control for aged horse welfare and, indeed, advances in dewormers have improved overall equine health. However, there are differing opinions on the specifics.

“Older horses might be better strongyle hosts because their immune systems aren’t as strong,” says Holland. “A study by T.S. Mair on aged versus younger ponies came to a similar conclusion—that older ponies had greater strongyle numbers simply because their immune systems couldn’t fight them off. For this reason, owners can consider a daily deworming schedule with pyrantel tartrate for their aged horses, something they should discuss with their veterinarians.”

Craig Reinemeyer, DVM, PhD, president of East Tennessee Clinical Research, has another perspective. “What we know is that individual horses differ in their susceptibility to strongyle infection. However, we don’t know if this characteristic

For horses with poor teeth, consider forage cubes or pellets, adding warm water to make a soupy mash that is easy to eat and digest.
Feed STRONGID® C 2X™ every day, and parasites (*S. vulgaris*) seldom get a chance to take hold. When parasite damage is controlled, the benefits may actually be visible in your horse’s performance, condition and appearance. And you’ll feel better knowing your horse feels his best. To learn more, see your veterinarian or visit strongidC2X.com.
changes with age,” he says. “To answer that question, one would have to start with a baseline assessment, using fecal egg counts, while a horse was still middle-aged, then follow it annually through several years to see if there are any significant deviations (in the numbers of parasite eggs).” Then you and your veterinarian would plan a deworming program based on the fecal egg count findings and perceived need.

Keeping his cool The stresses of summer weather can affect your older horse in other ways. “Horses with Cushing’s can sometimes stop sweating,” says Holland. “For these horses, it’s a good idea to clip their body hair and use fans or misting equipment to keep them cool.” Be sure you’re providing shelter from sun for all older horses. Holland also suggests taking digital pictures of your healthy horse in the summer when his coat is sleeker and weighing him so you have a body condition and weight record for comparison over time.

If you’re still riding your older horse, you might want to evaluate your saddle fit. Holland says, “Horses lose muscle mass as they age. Periodically ask your veterinarian to do a musculoskeletal assessment as part of your horse’s wellness exam. You can also have a saddle fitter evaluate your current saddle; you might need to add additional saddle pads for the horse’s comfort.”

Autumn
The once-over ... again The first hard frost is traditionally a cue for another deworming cycle if your veterinarian recommends it based on the horse’s fecal egg count status; any earlier and you risk reinfection of paddocks and, thus, horses. This is the time for protecting against bots and strongyles, if that wasn’t done in the summer. Ivermectin and moxidectin are effective against bot larvae in a horse’s stomach, and since they’re broad-spectrum they are designed to remove many other internal parasites if used at this time of year. Remove bot eggs manually from the legs, mane, and shoulders. Don’t forget to use a product that is effective against equine tapeworms in the fall (one that includes praziquantel, the only active ingredient confirmed effective against equine tapeworms).

Although many people think the objective of parasite control is killing adult worms in the horse, Reinemeyer says it’s really creating a parasite-free environment. “We’re seeing anthelmintic resistance on a large scale, and there aren’t any new dewormers coming down the pipeline,” he cautions, “The best advice I can offer is to conduct periodic fecal egg counts to identify the anthelmintics that still work in the herd, prevent contamination of pastures through selective use of effective dewormers, and avoid overstocking of pastures.”

A second veterinary wellness exam, with another oral exam if your horse has been exhibiting chewing problems or decay (indicated by a foul odor), is also warranted in the autumn. “Periodontal disease and loose teeth are very painful for a horse; they hurt him every time he chews,” says Mary DeLorey, DVM, of Northwest Equine Dentistry in Washington. “In those circumstances, you’re likely to get quidding (partially chewed wads of food falling out of the mouth), which is a clear sign of dental pain or chewing difficulty.”

Even an older horse whose teeth aren’t functional—either worn smooth or missing—still needs exams, perhaps several times annually. “Horses have hypsodont (long crown, short root) teeth; they’re born with up to four inches of slightly cone-shaped tooth in their jawbone, which erupts as they wear down the surface, a few millimeters each year,” says DeLorey. “As the teeth age, the tooth circumference decreases and gaps can open up between teeth. Food gets packed in because of the grinding forces of the jaw and can cause gingivitis or periodontal disease. If we catch it early, we can heal it. Once over 25% of the tooth’s attachment has been lost, then we’re potentially in deep trouble.”

A thorough oral exam requires using mild sedation and a full-mouth speculum. If your horse has loose incisors or parrot mouth, DeLorey recommends a gum plate, which puts the pressure behind the front teeth instead of on them. And as for sedating an older horse? “Generally, sedatives for horses are very safe now, with any reactions being minor and transitory. Serious complications would be extremely rare,” she says.

All Year Long
“Older horses are truly a puzzle,” says Holland. “Owners have to be committed to figuring out the best care for them. Keeping records throughout the year to discuss with your veterinarian, making changes in their environment gradually, and finding a second or even a third career for these elder horses is key. They can be reliable hippotherapy partners or schooling mounts; they’ll school kids better than any riding instructor! You’ve got to remember; they do have personalities. Owners need to give them something to live for.”

Take-Home Message
“Old” used to mean broken-down, used up, worn-out. Now old is a relative term, and with appropriate care and activity, combined with a little detective work when problems arise, your equine partner can be healthy and active for many years to come.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Lisa Kemp is a freelance writer/photographer and marketing coach for the equine industry. Her definition of a good day is one filled with any combination of horse people, horse images, horse stories, and, yes, actual horses.