

FEEDING SENIOR HORSES



I recently visited a horse owner that wanted to know when it was time to start feeding senior feed to her horse. She currently had him on a 10% protein sweet feed mix. She said he was underweight and not sure why, as she was providing the horse about 9kg pounds per day, but he was not eating it all. I explained that we often begin to watch horses for signs of being a “senior horse” around age 15-18. Some may go much later in to life before showing signs, but somewhere in this age range is when we watch for signs of decreased muscle mass, decreased quality of hair coat, and an inability to maintain weight on their “normal” diet.

With this horse, I found small clumps of chewed hay on the ground around his feeder, or “quids” as they are called. This happens due to dental deterioration or loss, which inhibits the horse’s ability to chew his hay. Upon examining the horses manure, we noticed a lot of undigested grain. I suggested that the owner have the horse’s teeth floated, as well as have blood work drawn to check for Cushing’s or other metabolic issues. Once the horse’s teeth were taken care of, and any metabolic issues ruled out, we could move toward a more suitable senior diet. As horses grow older their ability to digest feed and absorb nutrients becomes less efficient. Senior horse feeds will generally have the following elements to make sure older horses are receiving all the nutrition they need:

1. Increased protein level in order to provide proper amino acids, such as lysine and methionine, for metabolic functions, muscle maintenance and hoof quality.
2. Elevated fat content to provide extra calories, with the bene fit of Omega 3 and Omega 6 fatty acids.
3. Yeast cultures & direct-fed microbials (more commonly known as prebiotics and probiotics, respectively) to support nutrient digestion.
4. Organic trace minerals that are more highly bioavailable than traditional trace mineral sources.
5. Enhanced calcium and phosphorus levels to help guard against bone demineralization.
6. Manufactured as a soft, high fiber pellet or multiparticle feed that is easily chewed. In cases where dental loss is extreme, the feed can even be mixed with equal parts warm water to form a mash. Also, with senior feeds, if the horse is unable to chew any hay, the diet can be adjusted to 4 or 5 feedings of senior feed per day, to meet caloric requirements.