

# Merck Health Matters: Geriatrics

*Consider the aging horse as a unique client, and understand how to convey your recommendations for care in a way to get owner compliance.*

By Kimberly S. Brown

**W**hen looking for a growing niche around which to build a business center for your practice, the aging horse with a caring owner might be a good choice. But you need to understand what these owners want for their aging horses, the health problems that these horses face and how to best communicate your standards of geriatric care in order to assure owner compliance.

A 2015 survey by *Stable Management* magazine asked stable owners with lesson horses about the age of the youngest horses in their programs. More than 43% said that their youngest school horses were more than 10 years of age, with 15% responding that their youngest school horses were 16 years of age or older. In that survey, nearly 60% said that their oldest lesson horses were more than 21 years of age. When asked what they did with lesson horses after their careers were over, more than 79% said that they retired the horses on their farms or other farms.

*EquiManagement* and Merck Animal Health turned to Lois Toll, DVM, a 1992 graduate of Colorado State University, for some hands-on insights into the topic of older horses. Toll has practiced at Littleton Equine Medical Center in Colorado since graduation and said that she has “accumulated a number of older patients, both in my practice and in my own backyard.”

In addition to being on the boards of the Dumb Friends League in Denver and the Colorado Unwanted Horse Alliance, Toll is a member of the Rocky Mountain Farriers Association.

## TOP HEALTH ISSUES

A horse is usually considered a “geriatric” animal when it reaches its late teens or older, and/or it exhibits several conditions associated with aging. Toll said that she considers a horse to be “geriatric” either when it is diagnosed with PPID, or when the horse’s owner is forced to adjust its lifestyle because of dental problems.

She believes that the top three issues facing older horses are management of PPID, dental/nutritional issues and arthritis. “Vaccination and deworming are always important, especially

because older horses’ immune systems may be compromised,” she added.

Toll reminded veterinarians that nutrition is affected by the ability of the horse to process and absorb feed. “I evaluate fiber, protein, fat and omega-3 fatty acids when I do a nutritional consult,” she said.

“I believe older horses can be competitive or useful for a long time, but their job descriptions may change,” Toll explained, adding that these management changes require a commitment from the owners with regard to joint maintenance and exercise. “The best school horse in my practice is 33,” she noted.

How do you know whether an older horse needs different or additional care and management? “Signs of failing health are weight loss, change in topline, change in hair coat, depression, quidding and nasal discharge,” cited Toll.

She believes that the use of medications depends on the horse. “If the horse is sore, usually I prescribe an anti-inflammatory; but it may be aspirin or a limited amount of phenylbutazone so they can’t get in trouble for overdosing,” she said.

Management is important for all horses, but especially for seniors. “I think it can be good for both young and old horses to be in a herd situation, but it has to be adjusted if the old horse starts losing weight because they can’t compete for food,” she said.

“An important part of working on an older population is knowing when you have reached the end,” she advised. “I used to say it was when their teeth were gone, but with the senior feeds, that is no longer true. Now I say it is when they can no longer get up and down. It is much easier to have that conversation before it is a crisis, so that you can have a sense of the owner’s wishes before they are confronted with losing their friend of 20-plus years.”

Veterinarians need to be very observant when older and younger horses share a pen or paddock. “I think the horse who may be at greatest risk is the second-oldest horse in the pen,” said Toll. “That’s because he may not have aged as gracefully, but will never be perceived as old because there is an older one standing next to him.” ♦

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