



SARACEN
HORSE FEEDS

FACT SHEET

'Active Veterans'

Information suggests that older horses (e.g. more than 15-20) now comprise a much larger proportion of the overall horse population. More than ever the horse is a treasured companion and we strive to ensure that this rewarding relationship lasts for as long as is reasonably possible. The adage 'you are only as old as you feel' perhaps also applies to horses! Not only are we seeing an increased population of older horses but many of them continue to succeed out in the show ring and are only too game to attack the cross country course. This article will review some measures that we can take to ensure that the 'active veteran' receives all nutritional and management support necessary.

Dental problems are common in old horses no matter how well they may look or perform and frequently result in the loss of body weight and inability to maintain optimum condition. The most common dental problems include excessive wear, missing teeth and abnormal wear patterns. Tooth decay and gum infections are also more common. The most obvious effect of dental problems is a decrease in feed intake. Decreased feed intake can be attributed to pain and an inability to properly chew fibre. The latter is frequently manifest as 'quidding' the feed and partially chewed bits of hay etc are dropped from the mouth. Poorly chewed hay and fibre can also predispose the horse to choke because of lower than normal saliva production during mastication. With decreased saliva production there is less lubricant to aid the passage of ingesta through the oesophagus. Another risk factor of decreased saliva production is that of gastric ulcers, as excess stomach acid will begin to build up and irritate the delicate lining of the upper non-glandular portion of the stomach. Gastric irritation resulting from decreased fibre intake and saliva production is likely to manifest itself as a failure to maintain body condition, reduced coat quality and performance and irritability.

Dietary fibre is the most important consideration when designing a diet for any horse but perhaps even more so for the old horse, particularly one that is out competing or in regular work. Imperfect mastication will impair assimilation of energy and other dietary nutrients from the feed, the result being progressive weight loss. Ideally there should be daily access to pasture, as this is easily chewed and digested. In the spring and summer months good quality grazing will usually provide adequate energy levels to help maintain body condition. However, care must be taken with daily turnout if your veteran is suffering from Cushing's Syndrome or is a good doer, as these horses will have an increased risk of laminitis. Good quality pasture will not necessarily provide all of the older horse's nutritional requirements and additional quality protein sources, vitamins and minerals and energy (if required for body condition and work) will need to be supplemented in the form of a concentrate feed.

If your veteran finds chewing hay or haylage difficult then you may need to consider using alternative fibre sources to ensure adequate fibre intake. These will also provide a good deal of slow release energy to the diet, which will help to fuel the work being done while reducing the reliance on feeding large amounts of cereal and starch based feeds. Digestible fibre sources such as alfalfa, unmolassed sugar beet, high fibre cubes can be mixed together to form a palatable and easily chewed replacement haynet! Digestible fibre sources such as these will contribute more in the way of energy and therefore calories to the diet so it would be advisable to check with a nutritionist about suitable concentrate feeding plans to ensure that you achieve just the correct amount of energy and protein etc for the job that you are asking your veteran to perform.

Ageing may adversely affect digestive function. In one study, the digestibility of protein, fibre and phosphorous were lower in mares over 20 years of age compared to mares of less than 10 years of age (Ralston *et al.* 1989). It has been hypothesized that poor dentition and /or the effects of parasitic larval migration in the large intestine were responsible for the lowered fibre, protein and phosphorus digestibility, although more research is required to clarify these issues.

For many veterans that are still in regular work a well-formulated senior feed will meet their requirements and support light to medium work intensities. These should have a minimum of 12% dietary fibre and a protein percentage that is between 12 and 16%.



For those who know what they're on.

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Digestible energy levels are typically around the 12-14MJ/kg region, which is similar to some of the working mixes available on the market. To ensure that cereals, such as barley and maize, are digested properly these should be micronized or steam cooked. These cooking processes increase the surface area of the grain for enzyme digestion, thus decreasing the risk of undigested starch reaching the hindgut. The inclusion of digestible fibre sources such as soya hulls, sugar beet pulp and alfalfa are also included to help boost fibre intake and reduce the reliance on cereals to provide a large proportion of the digestible energy. Protein should be of high quality and contain the essential amino acid Lysine. This is often achieved by including soya bean meal in the formulation.

Prebiotics, such as yeast, are often included and these are substances that support intestinal microorganisms. Yeast, a common prebiotic, furnishes amino acids and oligosaccharides that nourish desirable bacteria. There is also some evidence to suggest that some prebiotics enhance the equine immune system.

Mineral and vitamin fortification should be higher than that for standard maintenance feeds to account for a possible age related decline in digestive efficiency. Antioxidants, such as vitamin E and selenium are particularly important for those veterans that are in regular work, as these help to protect living cells and muscles against the harmful effects of free radicals that are produced during metabolism. Insufficient antioxidant protection may lead to increased muscle soreness and longer periods between full recovery. Some veteran diets now also contain a natural source of vitamin E (d-alpha tocopherol), which research has proven to be more available to the horse and more readily taken up and retained in the tissues than synthetic vitamin E (dl-alpha tocopherol). There is also some research that suggests that natural vitamin E can improve immune function. Who knows, perhaps natural vitamin E can also help to keep our veterans looking and feeling younger in the same way the expensive face creams can claim to do to us!!!!

- **FOR FURTHER TECHNICAL INFORMATION ABOUT THE PRODUCTS MENTIONED PLEASE VISIT OUR WEBSITE www.saracenhorsefeeds.co.uk OR FOR A PERSONAL FEEDING PLAN PLEASE CALL OUR FEED HELPLINE 01622 718487.**



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